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Pushing Back on School Pushout: Youth at an Alternative School Advocate for Educational Change Through Youth Participatory Action Research

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Pushing Back on School Pushout: Youth at an Alternative School Advocate for
Educational Change Through Youth Participatory Action Research

by

Jessica H. Burbach

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Education
in
Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction

Dissertation Committee:
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Abstract

In the United States, a staggering four thousand students drop out every school day. Moreover, in 2016, the graduation rate in Oregon was only 74.8%, one of the lowest in the nation. Research shows that a disproportionate number of youth leaving school are from historically marginalized communities. Many of these youth resiliently return to education at alternative schools. This research sought to explore the educational experiences of youth in alternative schools in their own voices and perspectives. From a theoretical framework based in sociocultural theory, cultural capital, and critical theory, this study underscored the importance of youth voice in changing the education system by incorporating qualitative methods and YPAR (Youth Participatory Action Research). Working alongside seven youth co-researchers who attended an alternative school in Oregon, we interviewed eight other students at the same school about their educational experiences and perceptions of the education system. The youth co-researchers and I co-constructed four themes collectively: “I felt invisible to the teachers”; “Teaching is a sacred act”; “Regular high school is like drowning, it’s cruel”; and “Dropping out was [actually] a success.” We also compiled counternarratives in the words of the eight student participants, which highlighted how the school system pushed them out despite their desire to learn. Finally, we spoke truth to power, in solidarity with the youth in this study, by presenting our recommendations for educational change to teachers, including how they can co-create spaces with students that foster care and empathy, value youth voice, and are culturally sustaining and identity affirming.

Dedication

To the young people who dared speak their truths to a school system that had turned its back on them. You bravely spoke up so that future young people, like yourselves, would not suffer the same indignities and traumas in school:

Bee Beltran, Irisa Ramiz, Lulis Lares Benitez, Maria Chitala, Shania Diaz, and Sk8 Nash

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To my parents, Brenda Forrest and Mark Hopson, your love and support gives me the courage to take risks. The comfort in knowing you are there for me and have my back is a tremendous gift.

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Chapter 1: Problem Statement

“Motivation is opportunity, but can be taken” –Kelsey

“Hard-worker, quiet, strong, stubborn, independent, friendly” –Rosa

“Alpha male elite warrior seeking truth” –Aaron

“Mexican, motivated, humble, athletic, friendly, focused” –Guillermo

“I am many, I know many” –Jake

“Patient, open, resilient, persistent, happy, blessed” –Deontae¹

Take a moment to find a point of connection with the words above. Is there a word or phrase that resonates with you, relates to you, or even sounds like it could be you? It may surprise you that these words are how youth, who attend a local alternative school and have been labeled as “dropouts” by the school system, describe themselves. In essence, these youth are writing counternarratives that push back on the stereotypes of the dominant narrative and that define what it means to be a “dropout” who attends an alternative high school. The dominant narrative largely blames students for losing motivation, giving up on school, and choosing to drop out. And yet, this is not how these youth describe their identities. When offering an explanation for the words she chose, Kelsey acknowledged that throughout her life, she did not feel support or motivation from others. Instead, she had to make her own motivation. Although others have tried to take away her motivation, and thereby take away her opportunities in life, she has resisted. As she puts it, “my motivation is what has made me a success.”

¹ Student names are all pseudonyms.

Kelsey's story reflects the resiliency and brilliance I see in many of my students at Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS—a pseudonym) where I teach 17-24 year olds who are working toward their high school completion either through a diploma or GED. They are labeled “dropouts” by the school system, but most have a story about how the mainstream high school system pushed them out, failed to meet their diverse needs, and/or asked them to assimilate to one model of excellence based on White, middle-class values. These bright and capable youth are on a longer, more difficult path to a career and economic stability because the education system did not serve them. As a result, the potential impact these youth hope to have on themselves, their families, and their communities is needlessly delayed and complicated. At the same time, these youth have garnered both internal and external resources to persist in very difficult situations and to accomplish their goal of returning to complete their education.

The purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out of school from their own perspectives and in their own voices. In particular, the study focused on the experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities in terms of their perceptions of what prevented their success in mainstream schools, and, in contrast what helped them in alternative schools. Ultimately, the study underscored the importance of youth voice and how their voices matter in changing the education system.

Background of the Problem

“Definitions belong to the definers—not the defined” (Morrison, 1987, p. 190). In other words, the definition of high school dropout says much more about the ideology

and values of the definers of the dominant culture, rather than those students that drop out. In their 1983 study, Fine and Rosenberg identified how the common stereotype of dropouts defined them as “helpless, hopeless, and depressed” (p. 265). Hence, the dominant narrative about dropouts paints a picture of youth who have given up, decided to leave school, and face nearly insurmountable obstacles to building a future career in terms of going to college, and/or earning a living wage. In her research, Lukes (2012) found that the “data suggest[ed] that the dropout label drastically limits understanding of the population in question, obscuring both their engagement with schooling and their educational goals” (p. 8). Similarly, Brown and Rodríguez (2009) asserted “despite a recent surge in dropout research in the past few years...perceptions of youth who leave school as delinquents, social deviants and ‘losers’ (as cited in Fine & Rosenberg, 1983) are prevalent” (p. 223). The implicit message in the dominant dropout narrative is an assumption that these youth are not willing to work hard, are unmotivated, and hence, that investing in these students returning to school will not yield improved outcomes. Some social scientists and economists have argued that we are overinvesting in solutions for troubled teens and dropouts that will not pay off (Kirp, 2015). Here I argue the opposite: that youth are pushed out of schools and yet they are motivated, resilient, and their return to education is worthy of our investment for future citizenry (Steinberg & Almeida, 2012).

The distressing rate at which students are leaving school before graduating has many governmental agencies, educational researchers, and even the progressive media (Frontline, 2012) deeply interrogating the issue. In the United States, a staggering four

thousand students drop out every school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015). This number is down from 2010 when the Alliance for Excellent Education reported that seven thousand students drop out every school day. The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) has also stated that the dropout rate has been slowly declining from 2000 to 2015. While this trend is hopeful, I speculate that the true number of dropouts is being obscured by new categories and classifications for dropouts, such as stopout, event dropout, and status dropout (McFarland, Stark, & Cui, 2016). What has remained the same is that a disproportionate number of non-White students and students from working class backgrounds are being pushed out of school because they do not feel seen, valued, or heard by the school system (Schwartz, 2013). The National Center for Education Statistics (2017) reported that in every year between 2000 and 2015, the dropout rate has consistently been higher for Black and Lantinx² youth compared to White youth. In focus groups with over ninety-five GED earners and seekers, Tuck (2012) found that one of the themes was “poor students, students of color, and undocumented students are especially unwelcome in some schools” (p. 66). It is a dangerous contradiction that while principals and teachers tout equal opportunity in education, the data and experience of people in historically marginalized communities shows that the pushout rate is mediated by race and class and not by merit (Fine, 2003). In fact, some educational scholars (Delpit, 2012; Ladson-Billings, 2009; McLaren, 2002; Tuck, 2012) have argued that students are forced to assimilate to the ways of speaking, thinking, and acting of the dominant White, middle and upper class culture in order to be successful in school. One way that students can

² Lantinx is the gender-neutral term used as an alternative to Latino, Latina and even Latin@

resist this assimilation is to drop out. However, when the choice to stay in school means diminishing your overall sense of power, agency, and positive identity (Varley Gutiérrez, Wiley, & Khisty, 2011), for some students it is no choice. Hence, students from historically marginalized communities are disproportionately pushed out by an assimilationist school system. From this perspective, school pushout can be seen as an example of institutional racism (defined in the next section) and the centrality of racial inequality and racism in the education system (Gillborn, 2009). Consequently, as schools maintain homogeneity, we lose the diversity of language, culture, ways of knowing, etc. in our schools and in our nation.

Key Terms

In this section, I define the key terms that are most relevant for this study. These terms will be used throughout the subsequent chapters and are important for understanding the purpose, context, and people at the center of this study. For the sake of clarity, I have chosen to define these terms early on rather than at the end of this chapter.

Pushout

The term pushout refers to students who leave school before graduating. Since the 1990s, the term dropout has declined in use, leaving an opening for terms like pushout to enter popular discourse (Kamenetz, 2015). I will use the term pushout throughout this paper to underscore the “experiences of those youth who have been compelled to leave school by people or factors inside school, such as disrespectful treatment from teachers and other personnel, violence among students, arbitrary school rules, and the insurmountable presence of high stakes testing” (Tuck, 2012, p. 1). The distinction

between pushout and dropout is important. Dropout implies that leaving school was the students' intention/decision, while pushout implies that it was the result of the actions of others, and indicative of other societal root causes.

Youth

I define youth as persons between the ages of 15 and 25. This is the definition of youth recognized by the General Assembly of the United Nations since 1981 (United Nations, 2013).

Historically Marginalized

I recognize that the term historically marginalized is yet another label with the potential to reproduce a deficit framework and cast communities as the “other” and as victims. It is important to clearly define what I mean by it. I am referring to a sub-group of students in U.S. K-12 schools from communities that have been systematically excluded from equitable and high quality education and the democratic political process throughout U.S. history. Specifically, I am speaking about people who identify or are identified as African-American or Black, Latinx, American Indian, Asian and Pacific Islander, working class, and/or English language learners.

Dominant Narrative

Dominant narratives are stories about everyday life that legitimize and promote a set of common cultural ideas (Peters & Lankshear, 1996). In other words, the dominant narrative makes normal the views, perspectives, and ideas of the dominant White, middle and upper class culture in order to maintain its power and privilege in the society (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009).

Counternarrative

The counternarrative describes the stories of those whose history has not been told and who some characterize as having been historically silenced (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). Individuals from groups “whose knowledges and histories have been marginalized, excluded, subjugated or forgotten in the telling of official [or dominant] narratives” are the people who share counternarratives (Peters & Lankshear, 1996, p. 2).

Institutional Racism

Institutional racism in the education system refers to how its practices, policies, and structures “encode a deep privileging of white students and, in particular, the legitimization, defense, and extension of Black, [Latinx, American Indian, Asian and Pacific Islander] inequity” (Gillborn, 2009, p. 62). It is the combination of racial prejudice and a system power and privilege, which benefits White people while oppressing people of color. Central to institutional racism is the belief in the supremacy of White people and the institutional power to enforce that belief (Western States Center, 2003).

Context of the Problem

Who gets pushed out of school is a complex issue with an interaction of factors relating to larger sociopolitical, historical, and economic contexts. A disproportionate number of students who drop out of high school are from low-income families and more than half of the students who drop out are students of color (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010; McFarland et al., 2016). Hence, the already poor get poorer and the historically disenfranchised further disenfranchised. Taken together, the sociopolitical,

historical, and economic contexts speak to the greater system that maintains the power and privilege of the dominant White, middle and upper class, while subjugating entire communities.

Sociopolitical Context

As the population of school-age children gets increasingly culturally, ethnically, and linguistically diverse, there is also a growing population that has no school-age children. Fowler (2013) states that one of the implications of these demographic trends is that it will be hard for some Americans to identify with today's children and feel responsible for their education. It is even more difficult for some Americans to relate to or empathize with the population of high school "dropouts" trying to reengage in their education. And yet, when parents from historically marginalized communities advocate for improvements in the school system, their voices are muted and disregarded (Ladson-Billings, 2006). As a result and according to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2015), the U.S. school system continues to funnel students from historically marginalized communities into low-graduation-rate high schools, increasing their likelihood to be pushed out. "Students of color make up 90 percent or more of the student population in half of these low-graduation-rate high schools" (p. 2). At the same time, the suspension and expulsion rate for Black students is three times greater than White students and 70% of students arrested at school are Black and Latinx³ (Dignity in Schools, 2015). It is no wonder that we talk more about a school to prison pipeline rather than a cradle to college pipeline for these communities. Ultimately, the disproportionate pushout of students of

³ Note that I am citing reported statistics that may be over or under reported.

color and students from working class backgrounds ensures that another generation of youth from historically marginalized communities is disenfranchised and silenced.

Historical Context

Since 2002, the move toward standardization and accountability structures prompted by No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and Race to the Top (RttT) has made it more difficult for schools to accommodate a diverse and changing population (Marion & Gonzales, 2014). In a metasynthesis of 49 qualitative studies on curriculum in the era of high-stakes testing, Au (2007/2013) found a relationship between the narrowing of curriculum and more teacher-centered instruction. As curricula have become increasingly scripted and preplanned, it has become more difficult for teachers to be responsive to the needs of individual students in the classroom, and less likely to incorporate students' cultural and linguistic resources. In fact, an unintended consequence of the high-stakes testing movement has been an increase in the student dropout rate (Clarke, Haney, & Madaus, 2000). In order for schools to increase their test scores, students who score low on high-stakes testing have been pushed out through suspension on testing days and transfer to alternative schools (Dignity in Schools, 2011). By limiting multiple routes to graduation, NCLB and RttT actually contribute to school pushout (Tuck, 2012).

Economic Context

By focusing on how best to support this often negated population of pushed out students in returning to school, we can encourage economic growth within communities that have long been subjected to income inequalities. Steinberg and Almeida (2012) argue that “a concentrated effort focused on this large, growing, historically neglected

population is essential to the nation's economic well-being and the health of our communities" (p. 3). Young people who do not have high school completion are more likely to be unemployed, have less job security, or work for minimum wage. In fact, "over the course of his or her lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010, p. 3). As a result, the school pushout rate is a significant problem that contributes to the growing economic divide in this country. Investing in youth who are returning to school means investing in youth of color and working class youth. It also means that these populations are more likely to be employed and earning a living wage, thereby boosting the economy and supporting the health of historically marginalized communities.

The cumulative social, political, and economic inequalities experienced by these communities over time have created what Ladson-Billings (2006) asserts is a mounting *educational debt*. On-going public investment in students who are pushed out of school is part of paying back the education debt. Addressing this debt is key to educational equity and to improving the educational, economic, and sociopolitical realities for communities of color and working class communities.

Oregon Context

It is important to understand the specific educational, economic, and sociopolitical context in Oregon. In 1990, Oregon voters passed Measure 5, which capped spending for public schools from property taxes, and instead made them reliant on income tax revenues. As a result, funding for all schools in Oregon became much more volatile. To account for the lost funding from property taxes, the funding came from income tax

revenue, which fluctuates no matter the state of the economy (Manning, 2016). Since then, Oregon schools have suffered budget reductions even in times of economic prosperity for the last 27 years (Manning, 2016; Rector, 2010). While some rural, low-income districts in Oregon saw improved budgets, many schools were forced to shut down programs with a career and technical focus, such as shop classes, and engineering, agriculture, and aquaculture programs (Manning, 2016). In fact, currently school districts in the greater Portland metro area spend 10% to 33% less than the U.S. national average per student (Manning, 2016). Hence, the on-going public investment in schools, and therefore the funding of alternative schools in Oregon, is inadequate and monetary resources that could support Oregon school to mitigate the issue of school pushout are limited.

In terms of the politics surrounding alternative education in Oregon, the state legislature recently acknowledged a lack of support for alternative education by the Oregon Department of Education (ODE). A report by the Oregon Secretary of State's Audits Division (2017) recommended stronger accountability and support of alternative education to improve outcomes for "academically at-risk" students. During the 2015 – 2016 school year, the report found that alternative schools and programs and online schools served about 10% of the population of Oregon's youth enrolled in public education and had significantly higher "dropout" rates compared to traditional schools—18% versus 3.94% (Oregon Secretary of State's Audits Division, 2017). Hence, the report recommended that the ODE strengthen their support of programs, such as alternative schools, in order to support and invest in youth who are most at-risk of not graduating

and leaving school. Alternative schools and programs in Oregon are also more likely to be serving economically disadvantaged young people, as well as, young people from historically marginalized communities (Oregon Secretary of State's Audits Division, 2017). Thus, as the report argued that the lack of support of alternative programs represented an equity issue. The specific recommendations for the ODE were to collect better data and meaningful information in order to complete a performance analysis that would help identify and share strategies that are working among alternative schools. The report also recommended that the ODE play a stronger role in driving the improvement of alternative schools and programs through accountability reports and increased oversight. Consequently, the local media used this report's push for accountability and oversight of alternative education to paint a picture and perpetuate stereotypes of alternative schools as educationally inadequate with low academic expectations for young people (Hammond, 2017). In Chapter 4, the counternarratives of the young people involved in this study will refute these stereotypes and offer a different perspective on the alternative school in this study. I will discuss later in the implications section of Chapter 5, given the findings and interpretations of this study, whether the recommendations of this report will effectively address the issue of school pushout. Certainly, the statistics representing the pushout rate both nationally and in Oregon show that it needs immediate and effective solutions before more young people's lives are impacted negatively.

Validation that the Problem Exists

The first step in addressing educational inequalities for people in historically marginalized communities is naming and describing them. As previously stated, there is

no doubt that students are dropping out at an alarming rate, particularly students of color and poor students. Figure 1 shows the several key statistics from the Alliance for Excellent Education (2015), McFarland et al. (2016), and the National Center for Education Statistics (2017) describing the national issue of school pushout.

- The number of students who do not graduate from high school each year: approximately 750,000 students
- The fraction of students who do not graduate who are students of color: over half
- The dropout rate for Black youth: 7.2%; for Latinx youth: 9.9%; for American Indian/Alaska Native youth: 13.2%; for White youth: 4.5%; and for Asian youth: 2.4%
- The number of times more likely it is that a student who comes from the lowest quartile of family income drops out of high school than a student from the highest quartile: seven

Figure 1. Key statistics describing the issue of school pushout.

In Oregon, the pushout rate reflects the same racial and economic disparities. Low-income, immigrant, English language learners, single parent, rural household, youth of color, LGBT, and youth with disabilities are disproportionately represented in the population of students who do not graduate (Oregon Department of Education, 2015; Oregon Youth Development Council, 2014). Oregon has one of the lowest high school graduation rates in the nation at 74.8% (DePaoli, Balfanz, Bridgeland, Atwell, & Ingram,

2017). Examining the graduation rate of non-low income students, showed that Oregon is one of only four states that has a rate below the national average for all students (DePaoli et al., 2017). Oregon has a graduation rate of 56.3% for low-income students (DePaoli et al., 2017). In addition, Oregon also has the lowest graduation rate (57%) for Black high school students in the nation (McFarland et al., 2016). Whether intentionally or not, a lot of students in Oregon are leaving high school without high school completion. As a result, one in seven youth in Oregon are disconnected from their education and the labor force (Oregon Youth Development Council, 2014). For those students who do not graduate in Oregon, alternative education becomes one of their only available options for achieving high school completion at no cost.

These demographics are reflected at the alternative school where I teach, which serves students who have been pushed out of mainstream schools. In the words of my student, “[At my old school] I felt like an outcast, and I could go unnoticed from the teachers like I was invisible and I wasn't important.” Echoing my student, educational researchers assert that students from historically marginalized communities are denied their cultural and linguistic resources, are devalued, are silenced, and ultimately are pushed out by the education system (Fine, 1991; Noguera, 2008; Tuck, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999). Noguera (2008) asserts that the education system, more than any other social institution, has legitimized its reproduction of social and economic inequities. Similarly, I argue that the dominant narrative seeks to cover up and make normal the racial and economic inequities of who gets pushed out of U.S. schools.

Statement of the Research Problem

“We know of course there’s really no such thing as the ‘voiceless’. There are only the deliberately silenced, or the preferable unheard” (Roy, 2004). As stated earlier, the purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out from their own perspectives and voices. The perspectives and voices of these youth are often silenced and devalued; yet, they offer an invaluable viewpoint about what is and what is not working in mainstream as well as alternative education. Hence, the purpose of the study was to underscore the importance of youth voice and how their voices matter in changing the education system. Thus, the study will use youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a methodological vehicle to foreground youth voice and agency.

Informed by the work of critical education theorists (Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), this study sought to counter the silencing of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of schools. Critical educational theorists “explore how schools perpetuate or reproduce the social relationships and attitudes needed to sustain the existing dominant economic and class relations of the larger society” (McLaren, 2002, p. 215). As a result, schools exclusively privilege the knowledge and practices of the dominant group—the White, male, middle and upper class culture. This study was fundamentally based in the belief that meaningful change, such as decreasing the pushout of students of color and working class students, must come from the recommendations and viewpoints of the students who have been pushed out. Using Freire’s (1970) concepts of problem-posing education, critical consciousness,

and social action, this study was built on the assumption that foregrounding the voices of pushout students, including their perceptions of the education system, leads to more authentic data and findings. The goal was to research *with* (not *on*) pushout students by involving them as co-researchers, positioning them as authorities of their own educational experience, and building their awareness of the systemic issues that lead to school pushout as a way of moving them to social action (Cammarota & Fine, 2008). Similarly, Groundwater-Smith and Downes (1999) note that youth are generally the objects of research—observed, surveyed, measured, and commented upon—with little to no power over the research process. YPAR is a methodological tool which positions youth as partners and key interpreters in the research process who should have a voice in determining the implications of the research on their lives (Gerstein, 2010). As I will discuss in the next section, there is a lack of research that positions youth who have been pushed out as co-researchers, and thus findings of the research are rarely from the youth's own perspectives.

Significance of the Research Problem

Many studies (e.g. Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012; Rumberger, 2011) have sought to identify these underlying factors behind why students drop out of school and what can be done to prevent it. Other studies (Iachini, Buettner, Anderson-Butcher, & Reno, 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2013) have explored why youth who left school and returned to an alternative school have found success at the alternative school, which they did not at the mainstream school. However, there is a need for more qualitative research from the perspective of

and in the voices of youth—in particular those from historically marginalized backgrounds—who have been pushed out, yet returned to school in an alternative setting (Chou et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Chou et al. (2015) assert “youth are capable of providing insight into policy structures and what can be improved in school systems” (p. 438). And yet, when they are pushed out, their valuable critique of the education system, which could provide important insights regarding dropout prevention, is silenced and pushed to the margins along with the students themselves. The perspectives from youth on why they are pushed out of schools can give educators, policymakers, parents, and other stakeholders’ ideas on how to change the education system to mitigate the pushout rate.

As a methodological tool, YPAR carries educational significance. YPAR pushes for a shift in paradigm where youth are active agents in the research process and “have a voice in determining the implications of the research for appropriate educational policies and practices” (Groundwater-Smith and Downes, 1999, p. 9). Students, in particular pushouts, while not voiceless are largely silenced and unheard in the educational policy process (Fowler, 2013). “If youth who drop out are portrayed as unreasonable or academically inferior, then the structures, ideologies, and practices that exile them systemically are rendered invisible, and the critique they voice is institutionally silenced” (Fine, 1991, p. 5). Understanding more about the educational experiences of youth who are pushed out can lead educators and policy makers toward solutions that will create a more just and equitable education system. Moreover, using YPAR methods and through the participation of youth as co-researchers, this study may provide more effective

solutions for creating a more equitable education system because the findings will be co-constructed by youth and from their voice and perspective.

Presentation of Methods and Research Questions

To explore the educational experiences and perspectives of youth from historically marginalized communities, I used youth participatory action research (YPAR) methods. YPAR honors the inherent intelligence and capacity of the participants (Cammarota & Fine, 2008); it acknowledges the importance of co-constructing findings with participant co-researchers; and, empowers participants by creating space for them to move to social action (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). In other words, YPAR demands that pushed out youth from historically marginalized communities participate and advocate for educational change in the research. Involving youth who have been pushed out in the research process helped to counter the silencing of their perspective on the education system based on their experiences. It added more depth to the data collected on their educational experiences and perceptions of the education system. Additionally, involving youth helped to ensure that the data and findings were in their own words and from their perspectives, which is a quality that previous research has lacked. My use of YPAR methods in this study was greatly influenced by the YPAR studies from Chou et al. (2015) and Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell (2016).

Research Questions

In this study, I pursued the following research questions:

1. How do youth, ages 18-25, who were pushed out of mainstream schools before attending alternative schools, describe their educational experiences, specifically

what helped and what prevented their “success” in mainstream and alternative schools?

- a. How do these youth define “success” in school?
2. How do the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out of mainstream schools influence their perceptions of the educational system?
3. How do participating students in the role of youth co-researchers report their experiences of investigating their peers’ perceptions of the education system that did not serve them?

For this research, I recruited seven youth co-researchers (YCRs) from the alternative school where I teach. We spent time outside of the school building our research team community, reflecting on our own educational experiences, and developing a research plan based on these research questions (see research timeline in Appendix A for more details). Together we created a semi-structured interview protocol for collecting data from other youth at the same school about their educational experiences. The YCRs helped recruit and interview other participants at the same alternative school. We analyzed the data together using Freire’s (1970) cycle of praxis (question, reflection, action), which will be further explained in the methods section. Finally, the YCRs and I took action by presenting our findings to key stakeholders and creating demands for future changes to the education system in Portland.

In this chapter, I have described and validated the sociopolitical, historical, and economic context of the problem of school pushout. In particular, I have emphasized how school pushout is disproportionately silencing and disenfranchising youth from

historically marginalized communities. I have stated that the purpose of the study was to explore the educational experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out from their own perspectives and voices. Additionally, I have shown that this study filled a gap in educational research, especially because it used YPAR methodologies and involved youth in the research process as co-researchers. I have introduced my research questions and briefly discussed the methods, which I will elaborate on further in Chapter 3. The next chapter will deepen the rationale for using the participatory paradigm and YPAR in the study. In it I will describe my theoretical framework. I will also explore the relevant literature surrounding the issue of school pushout, as well as the perspectives and educational experiences of youth through the theoretical lenses of sociocultural theory, cultural capital, and critical theory. Finally, it will provide an overview of studies that have used YPAR within an educational context.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

“Those [students] most likely to leave high school prior to graduation carry with them the most critical commentary on schooling.” (Fine, 1991, p. 73)

Dance can be used as apt metaphor for this research study. Youth co-researchers and I are dancing together. We are learning new moves from each other and challenging each other to recognize our unique rhythms. This dance is not choreographed, instead, based on our individual intuition and instincts, we are co-constructing every step of this dance together as we dance it. All the while we are attempting to come together to create a cohesive group dance—this is our research. Our movements are reflective of the roots of this research, including the sociocultural theory of learning, critical theory, cultural capital, and the participatory paradigm. Emboldened by what we learned in these theories and from each other, we danced louder, moved with energy from our fingertips to our toes, and were more vulnerable by showing more of ourselves in our dance. However in our interrogations, we also occasionally wrestled with what limitations society, stereotypes, and our experiences have taught us about how we should dance. As previously stated, the purpose of this study was to interrogate the educational experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities who are typically silenced and disenfranchised by being pushed out of school. In this chapter, I will ask: what can we learn from the literature (theory and empirical research) about how to best capture, in their own words, the educational experiences and multiple perspectives of youth that are often hidden?

Theoretical Framework

In this chapter, I will review the key literature that forms the foundation and framework for this research study, I will justify the need for this study given the gaps in current educational research, and I will make an argument for the methodology I used in this study. There are three foundational pillars to this study: the sociocultural theory of learning, cultural capital, and critical theory/pedagogy. A visual depiction of my theoretical framework is shown in Figure 2. Critical theory and cultural capital are subsets of the sociocultural theory of learning and found within a dashed circle representing the school and community. The line is dashed because the school and community constantly transform as new knowledge is constructed. From the interaction of critical theory and cultural capital, emerges the methodological framework, youth participatory action research (YPAR). The issue of school pushout is a clear indicator that our understanding and conception of school and community is failing and needs to be reconstructed. Hence, as we co-construct new knowledge about school (sociocultural theory), a critical theory lens ensures that we focus on the voices on the margins from members of historically marginalized communities. A focus on cultural capital along with a critical theory lens will ensure that we use non-dominant knowledges, practices, and approaches from historically marginalized communities to co-construct new knowledge about school. And thus, from this interaction of cultural capital and critical theory lenses, emerges YPAR. YPAR is research *with* youth: youth co-construct knowledge based on their own experiences and what they learn as co-researchers; youth are part of the entire research process from the methods to data collection to analysis; and, youth take action to

make change based on their research findings. This action is represented by the larger arrow, which returns the new knowledge and ways of thinking about school co-created through YPAR back to the top of the model. In other words, YPAR creates space for

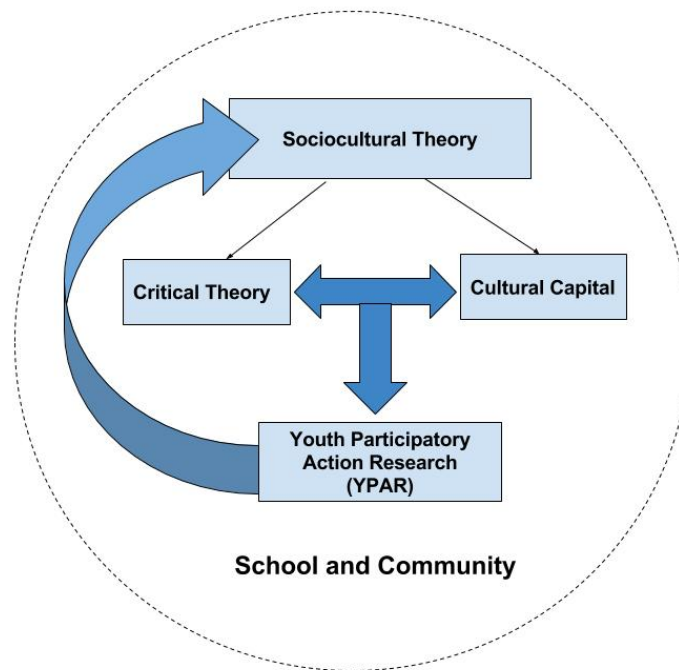


Figure 2. Theoretical framework for this research study.

youth voice, experience, and knowledge to enter into dominant educational research, speak truth to power, and potentiate change in education. As a result, the conception of the school and community changes based on this new knowledge and thinking to eliminate the problem, in this case, school pushout. In this next section, I will use this theoretical framework model to analyze the problem of school pushout and its disproportionate impact on youth from historically marginalized communities.

Sociocultural Theory

“*What* they [the teachers] are teaching is more important than *who* they are teaching.” I’ll never forget this response from my student when I asked him about what did not work for him at his previous mainstream schools. He desired a school model where learning was shared, relationship-based, grounded in the lives of students, and developed within community of teachers and students who are seen as both learners and teachers. I identify the sociocultural theory of learning to be this model. It states that knowledge is co-constructed through dialogue between individuals and through social activities. In essence, “we learn in relationship to others” (Green, 2014, p. 154). Additionally, this social learning process has a social, cultural, historical, and political context. It is a reimagining of what constitutes learning and it challenges many of the assumptions about learning and what education is for, which are present in the U.S. school system and lead to school pushout.

The sociocultural theory of learning suggests that knowledge is continuously negotiated through everyday social activities and that learning is not static, but an on-going co-construction of knowledge between people. Similarly, Dewey (1929/2013) described school as “form of community life” (p. 35). He asserts that education is collective learning through which society (the community) is constantly negotiating its purpose, shaping itself, and figuring its direction. In fact, according to Dewey (1927), it is only through participation in social inquiry, dialogue between community members, and sharing knowledge that we can learn to better address issues and create more just

communities. In this model, learning is a collective, social process with knowledge in constant negotiation.

Connection to school pushout. Consequently, the emphasis of the high-stakes testing movement on reproducing decontextualized knowledge independently, has led to deficit-based thinking and school pushout. Standardized tests measure the learning of individuals in a static, singular moment of time. In this model, learning is often prescriptive with pre-identified pathways for success. When an individual student does not find success on one of the pathways, they are often labeled “at-risk” or “deficient” and perhaps even put in the category of “likely to drop out”. Built from a deficit framework, these negative identities become part of the dominant social discourse and may be internalized by marginalized students and their teachers (Aguirre, Mayfield-Ingram, & Martin, 2013). Lave (1996) posited that theories that see learning as an individual phenomenon rather than a collective one, have led to deficit-based thinking. “Such theories are deeply concerned with individual differences, with notions of better and worse, more and less learning, and with comparisons of these things across groups-of-individuals” (Lave, 1996, p. 149). This model of learning blames the individual, rather than looking at the greater social, historical, economic, and political disenfranchisement of groups of individuals. Hence, it normalizes social inequality, such that we do not question the racial/socioeconomic disproportionalities in the pushout rate, nor the ability of standardized tests to measure learning when both are consistently mediated by race and class.

Research implications. According to sociocultural theory, knowledge is constructed in a community and the collaboration is impacted by the time, place, and other cultural surroundings, including both material and mental tools (Vygotsky, 1978; Daniels, 2001). Lave and Wenger (1991) developed the concept of “communities of practice,” which refers to groups of people collectively learning around a shared purpose. Through the scaffolding and support of more expert members, new members increase their participation as they learn and co-construct knowledge using shared cultural practices. Eventually, these new members become expert members themselves through joint participation in the community. As the interactions between the cultural, historical, political, and social contexts shaping that community shifts over time, as well as who makes up that community, so will its shared knowledge shift and be renegotiated. In terms of school, Lave (1996) suggested “teachers are probably recognized as ‘great’ when they are intensely involved in communities of practice in which their identities are changing with respect to (other) learners through their interdependent ideas” (p. 158). Hence, learning in school for both teachers and students is about the fluid interplay and constant negotiation between who we are and what we do (our shared cultural practices) in our community. Similarly, research investigations should research *with* and not *on* students by exploring research questions together in a community of practice.

Cultural Capital

Centering on the voices and processes of knowledge construction within historically marginalized communities means that dominant power structures must recognize the cultural capital within these communities (Mirra et al., 2016). Bourdieu’s

(1986) concept of cultural capital refers to the non-monetary assets, such education, ways of speaking and dressing, and other knowledge and practices that promote social mobility. He asserted that certain forms of cultural capital have more value than others in society and that these dominant forms of cultural capital explain why there is an inequitable distribution of wealth and resources. Those who have the dominant cultural capital are more likely to experience upward social mobility and have greater access to political, social, and economic resources than those who do not.

Similarly, Delpit (1995) discussed the culture of power—the set of tools, language, behaviors, and knowledge of the dominant culture, which are required for full political participation and economic opportunity. What is this dominant culture of power? Critical theory explains that in U.S. society, dominant cultural capital refers to the knowledge and practices of the White, male, middle and upper class—the dominant culture of power. On the one hand, Bourdieu's (1986) analysis presents a means for communities with non-dominant cultural capital to gain access to more economic opportunities and social transformation. However, on the other hand, if the only path to social mobility is through the acquisition of dominant cultural capital, then Bourdieu's (1986) cultural capital theory contributes to a deficit framework.

Yosso (2005) critiques Bourdieu's cultural capital theory for being too narrowly defined on White, male, middle and upper class values. It is based on the implicit assumption that communities with non-dominant cultural capital are lacking and that their knowledges and practices are less legitimate since they do not promote social mobility within the dominant culture (Yosso, 2005). Instead, she presents the theory of

community cultural wealth, which honors the experiences, histories, and lives of people from historically marginalized communities, and in particular communities of color.

Hence, Yosso (2005) affirmed alternate forms of capital in marginalized and non-dominant populations, including: aspirational capital, linguistic capital, familial capital, social capital, navigational capital, and resistant capital. In doing so, Yosso (2005) sought to dispel the deficit framework, which assumes that people from historically marginalized communities are culturally poor. On the contrary, they are rich in the knowledges and skills of resiliency, of navigating social institutions that are set up for them to fail, of multiple languages and forms of communication, of community resources and histories, and of resistance. Instead of blaming these communities for lacking dominant cultural capital, it validates and recognizes the knowledges, practices, and resources that do exist in these communities. Hence, it is not a question of blame or fault; instead the question is: whose knowledge counts? (Delgado Bernal, 2002; Ladson-Billings, 2000; Yosso, 2005).

Connection to school pushout. U.S. schools have too often excluded and devalued students' cultural and linguistic funds of knowledge as legitimate forms of knowledge making them more vulnerable to school pushout (González, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Valenzuela, 1999; Yosso, 2002). Funds of knowledge refers to the "historically accumulated and culturally developed bodies of knowledge and skills essential for household or individual functioning and well-being" (González et al., 2005, p. 72) and are based on the idea that *all* people have knowledge given to them by their life experiences. It recognizes that people's cultural, community, and household tools and practices are valuable and valid knowledge that influence how they think and develop

(González et al., 2005). The use of prior knowledge and skills is fundamental to the construction and consolidation of new knowledge and skills. Students from historically marginalized communities can more readily co-construct new knowledge when schools validate and utilize their funds of knowledge from their everyday, lived experiences. And yet, it is Eurocentric discourses that are present in mainstream schools while the histories, cultures, and experiences of students from marginalized communities, especially communities of color, are often entirely excluded from the curriculum (Yosso, 2002). The reproduction of the dominant culture's forms of knowledge in mainstream schools makes it more likely for students from historically marginalized communities to be pushed out of school (Valenzuela, 1999). In fact, leaving mainstream schools can be seen as an act of resistance to assimilation to the dominant culture and of reclaiming one's identity and cultural community wealth (Tuck, 2012; Valenzuela, 1999).

Research implications. Centering educational research on the knowledges and practices of students from historically marginalized communities threatens the racial hierarchy and power of the dominant culture. If, as Delgado Bernal (2002) states, students from historically marginalized communities are legitimate holders and creators of knowledge and if the U.S. curriculum shifts to center on this knowledge, then the White, middle and upper class values will no longer be treated as the standard by which everyone else is measured (hooks, 1994; Yosso, 2002). The racial and gendered hierarchies kept in place by the dominant culture of power would be dismantled. Speaking to other people of color, Anzaldúa (1990) asserts, "by bringing in our own approaches and methodologies, we transform that theorizing space" (p. xxv). Centering

on the theories—the histories, experiences, cultures, languages, and knowledges—of people from historically marginalized communities (and in particular communities of color) means social transformation and breaking down the systems of power, privilege, and oppression. Youth participatory action research (YPAR), which I will elaborate on later in this chapter, is one research methodology that transforms the theorizing space by centering on the voices of youth on the margins and involving them in the research process itself.

Critical Theory (Pedagogy)

Critical theory challenges the assumption that schools are places where equal opportunity for social mobility exists and explains why youth from historically marginalized communities are more likely to be pushed out of school. It describes how schools reproduce societal systems of power, which privilege some and oppress others based on race, class, and gender. Here I will speak about critical pedagogy, instead of critical theory, which is simply critical theory in practice in the classroom. Critical pedagogy offers teaching practices and guidelines for interrupting how schools maintain the status quo and for achieving social transformation in solidarity with historically marginalized communities. Critical education theorists have argued that: “School knowledge should have a more emancipatory goal than churning out workers...School knowledge should help create the conditions productive for student self-determination in the larger society that can only be achieved when class society is abolished” (McLaren, 2002, p. 211). In other words, schools should be spaces where students, in particular students from historically marginalized communities, collaborate with teachers to think

critically about social inequalities that affect them and to be agents of change in their communities.

Connection to school pushout. Instead of fulfilling promises of equal opportunity and participatory democracy, schools often silence students' voices and mute their sense of agency (Fine, 2003). Students who resist the silencing of their voices are more likely to be pushed out, perhaps due to disciplinary measures or as an act of self-protection after repeatedly not being seen, heard, or valued in school. As detailed in Chapter 1, the data shows that race and class determines who is more likely to feel invisible, who is more likely to be disciplined, and who is more likely to get pushed out. So, then what is school for and what is it really teaching students?

Too often schools, especially those that serve high populations of students of color and students from working class backgrounds, focus on rote memorization, ability to follow directions, and menial labor skills, instead of critical thinking (Yosso, 2002). This is what Freire (1970) called the banking model of education. In the banking model of education, students are seen as blank slates while teachers are experts who deposit their wealth of information into students (Freire, 1970). Banking education serves the interests of the dominant culture in maintaining the status quo because "the more students work at storing the deposits entrusted to them, the less they develop the critical consciousness which would result from their intervention in the world as transformers" (Freire, 1970, p. 73). Hence, according to critical education theorists (Darder, 1991; Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001; hooks, 1994; McLaren, 2002), the more covert purpose of

school is to maintain the social, political, and economic power of the dominant White, middle and upper class.

Consequently, a problem-posing education (Freire, 1970) seeks to disrupt the ways in which schools reproduce hierarchical power relations. Freire (1970) coined the term problem-posing education to describe how teachers and students can co-create a space to think critically about the world and to reimagine it as a more just place. In a problem-posing education students and teachers develop a critical consciousness—a deep understanding of the relationship between knowledge, power, and the social reproduction of privilege (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970). By questioning how the White, middle and upper class maintain their dominance while others are oppressed, teachers and students develop what McLaren (2002) calls emancipatory knowledge. This knowledge is the foundation of social transformation. It acknowledges that our reality is not static, but instead students and teachers in collaboration can be a part of transforming that reality. Freire (1970) asserted, “Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge” (p. 81). Hence, students are not objects for depositing knowledge, but instead are subjects with the power to question the status quo and create change in their communities to make them more just and equitable.

Research implications. Taking action, therefore, is key in critical pedagogy and also key to this study. According to Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008), the work of critical pedagogy is to move students and teachers beyond a critique of systems of power and oppression into action. Through problem-posing, teachers and students identify and

analyze a problem and create a plan of action. Then, they take action and reflect on the action through further analysis and evaluation (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008). An important tenet of critical pedagogy is that it develops the capacity and skill of teachers and students to be activists who confront inequalities and take steps to disrupt them in their community. In essence, research must have an action component.

This research study, informed by critical pedagogy, sought to work in solidarity *with* people from historically marginalized communities. Working in solidarity with does *not* mean seeking solutions and taking actions that help people in marginalized communities to fit into society or gain more comfort within current systems of power and privilege (Giroux, 2001). Working in solidarity with does *not* mean working *on* or *for* people in historically marginalized communities. It is not these communities who fundamentally need to change, but the dominant culture's hierarchy of power and those who keep it in power. Additionally, people from historically marginalized communities have agency and do not need saving. Working in solidarity *with* means deferring to the expertise, leadership, and guidance of people in these communities based on their experiences, knowledges, and practices. People from historically marginalized communities have the right, as subjects and agents of change in resisting oppression, to define their own realities (hooks, 1994).

Critique of Theoretical Framework

How do we negotiate the reality that to speak truth to power and make change, youth need access to the dominant tools and capital from the culture of power, while also leveraging and honoring other non-dominant forms of cultural capital? The

transformation of society into a more just and equitable place takes action beyond centering on the voices, knowledges, and practices of historically marginalized communities. And yet, from sociocultural theory we know that without critical thinking and dialogue in communities to wrestle with the complexities of this work, our actions will fall short. How do we do justice to and honor these theories in the classroom and through research? Realizing that a list of 10 easy steps to putting these theories into practice would be antithetical to their principles, there are still far less examples of critical pedagogy curricula than there are banking model curricula. Duncan-Andrade and Morrell (2008) have written that the education field has “insufficiently explore[d] the applications of critical pedagogy to urban education” (p. 49). While certainly a lot has been written since then to explore practical applications of critical pedagogy to urban education, it still remains a need and critique of teachers who learn about the theory that they are not sure how to put it in practice in the current school context when standardized testing still reigns. As will be discussed at the end of this chapter, youth participatory action research as a methodology provides answers to these questions and is one response to this critique here.

Review of Research Literature

Many studies have sought to better understand why youth are leaving high school before graduating in an effort to figure out ways to increase the high school graduation rate and improve students’ experiences in school. In this next section, I will review several pertinent studies. While not exhaustive, this review will highlight the need for qualitative research from the perspective of youth who have been pushed out of school,

especially research that involves youth in the data collection and analysis process. Some of these studies have contributed to the dominant deficit narrative about who drops out by focusing on the characteristics of the individual who leaves school. Other studies have contextualized students' experiences inside of the larger sociopolitical, historical, and economic context to construct counternarratives about youth who are pushed out of school. There are very few studies exploring the past and present school experiences of youth at alterative schools and only a handful that use youth participatory action research (YPAR) to co-construct counternarratives about their experiences *with* youth.

Dropout: The Silent Epidemic

In their 2006 study, Bridgeland et al. referred to high school dropout rates as a “silent epidemic afflicting our nation’s high schools” (p. 1) because the severity of the problem was largely unknown to schools and because there was relatively little research on the perspectives of students who had left school. At the time, most studies and reports on dropouts, with the exception of a handful of studies (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983; and Fine, 1991), focused on quantitative data describing two main categories to examine: the characteristics of the *individuals* who were dropping out and the qualities of the *institutions* (schools) they attended. These quantitative studies outlined here added key knowledge about the issue of school pushout by: (1) clarifying the racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in who gets pushed out; (2) showing a need for more perspectives from the youth themselves; (3) adding complexity to the reasons why students drop out; (4) highlighting the importance of students’ bonds with school and how the interaction between individual and institutional factors affect this bond.

Individual versus institutional factors. Rumberger and Thomas (2000) used data from a national database developed by the National Center for Education Statistics to analyze the distribution of dropout and turnover rates in a representative population of 10th graders in a large sample of U.S. high schools. They used this data to explore the differences in student-level variables (e.g. demographic, and family and academic background) and school-level variables (composition and school resources and processes) had on dropout and turnover rates. One significant finding was that student background and composition within a school accounted for about 44 percent of the variance in dropout rates among schools. Another significant finding was that about half the variability in dropout and turnover rates was due to school characteristics.

In a subsequent study, Rumberger and Rodrigues (2002), reasserted and renamed these two frameworks for viewing the issue of school pushout: the individual perspective (student-level variables) and the institutional perspective (school-level variables). However, they concluded that there were methodological challenges in “disentangling the effects” of individual and institutional or school-based factors in determining what is contributing most to the issue of school pushout. Using these two frameworks became a standard way for quantitative studies to analyze the most effective ways to mitigate school dropout and increase graduation rates. Later on, I will elaborate on how qualitative studies, including this study, have problematized this dichotomy between individual and institutional factors, opting to see these two frameworks as inextricably linked when examining the problem of school pushout.

Pushout as a civil rights crisis. Studies, such as Orfield, Losen, and Wald (2004) from the Civil Rights Project, continued to compare the individual and institutional factors of the dropout crisis. By studying the individual factors of school pushout, this study was fundamental in naming the disproportionate number of students of color being pushed out of schools as a “civil rights crisis” (p. 3). This study analyzed quantitative data from the state and federal level to examine the racial disparities in who leaves school. It also examined the effectiveness of the efforts of state and federal accountability and data tracking systems to improve high school graduation rates. Orfield et al. (2004) found clear evidence of lower high school graduation rates for students of color compared to White students across all 50 states. In fact, their study found that the lowest state high school graduation rates for White students were 20 percentage points higher than those of Black and Latinx students. The study also reported low graduation rates for Native Americans. Unfortunately, the study excluded an extensive discussion of graduation rates for Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders because their national graduation rate was higher than that of White students. However, this may have obscured particular groups within the large category of Asian American for whom the education system is not serving. Additionally, the study found that a lack of state and federal oversight meant that reported data on high school graduation rates was often inaccurate with the number of students dropping out severely underreported. While revealing with crucial clarity the racial disparities in the pushout rate with more accurate data, this study unintentionally served to reinforce the dominant narrative and normalize who does well in school and who drops out without couching this within the greater systems of power

and privilege and what Ladson-Billings (2006) has proposed as the concept of *educational debt*.

High stakes testing and school pushout. Unlike Rumberger and Thomas (2000) and Rumberger and Rodrigues (2002), the study from Orfield et al. (2004) also included qualitative data in the form of vignettes of individual students' experiences of being pushed out of school in specific states, such as New York, Alabama, Florida, Illinois, and Texas. These stories humanize the evidence in the study, namely that state and federal graduation and high-stakes testing accountability policies push out students. For example, these stories describe how students who had low test scores were given letters telling them to enroll in another school and how punitive attendance policies pushed out students. Hence, No Child Left Behind (NCLB), as a way to hold schools accountable for improving graduation rates, was actually, "creating incentives for removing low-scoring students" (Orfield et al., 2004, p. 12). While these stories represent youth perspectives and experiences of being pushed out, only half of the stories actually include a direct quote from a student. Overall, these stories are important, but are largely told about students without being written from their perspective and in their own words. Additionally, it suggests that the high-stakes testing movement and NCLB created schools that lacked empathy for students and which were more likely to push out students than to work to support them academically and emotionally. It is no wonder that the qualitative data I will describe in a later section shows how students who were pushed out point to poor student-teacher relationships as a reason.

Need for youth perspective. Despite the effort to share findings “written from the perspective of high school dropouts” (p. 1) and the collection of extensive qualitative data, the study from Bridgeland et al. (2006) also suffers from a lack of in-depth examples of student voice. The study did, however, provide needed complexity around the individual and institutional factors that affect students’ decision to leave school. The study used focus groups, surveyed, and interviewed 467 ethnically and racially diverse students aged 16 to 25 who had dropped out of high school in 25 different locations. The majority of students identified one of the following reasons for leaving school: classes were uninteresting, academic challenges, feeling unmotivated, and personal reasons (work, parenting, caregiving for a sick family member, etc.). Students also offered solutions for helping other students stay in school: improving the teaching and curricula so that it is more relevant and engaging, improving instruction supports from struggling students, building a safer school climate, building stronger relationships between staff and students, and strengthening the communication between parents and the school.

The majority of the data was represented as percentages from the survey responses and there are only a handful of times when the youth responses from a focus group or interview are directly quoted. Bridgeland et al. (2006) noted “nearly all of the students had thoughtful ideas about what their schools should have done to keep them from dropping out” (p. 3). And yet, the ideas for change presented in the study are written by the researchers and very rarely are in the students’ own words. It is also unclear whether the researchers returned to some students to member check and validate how they had represented what they said. Although the intention to represent the perspectives

of youth who have been pushed out is clear in this study, youth voice is subsumed in the researchers re-telling of their ideas for them, which may have distorted or misrepresented their ideas.

Pushout and pullout factors. More recently, quantitative studies looking at who drops out of school have added complexity to the reasons why students leave school. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) examined longitudinal data from a survey conducted in 2002 with 10th graders nationwide and then again two years later to better understand how individual factors, such as socioeconomic status and race/ethnicity, impact why students are both pushed out and pulled out of school. This study was built from the findings of Stearns and Glennie (2006), which showed that the model of a dropout process was inaccurate because “students of different gender and ethnic groups are affected by different push and pull factors at various ages and to varying extents” (p. 54–55). In other words, students were not simply dropping out, there were factors pushing out and pulling out these youth. Factors within the school that were discouraging students from staying were identified as pushout factors. Pullout factors referred to the cost-benefits analysis (Stearns & Glennie, 2006) of staying in school, whereby some students chose to leave school to work because of financial difficulties or because of family responsibilities, such as parenting or caregiving. Bradley and Renzulli (2011) found a relationship between race/ethnicity and gender in term of patterns of student pushout and pullout from school. For example, socioeconomic status accounted for the difference in it being more likely that Black students were both pushed and pulled out of schools compared to White students. Also despite controlling for socioeconomic status, Latinx students were still

more likely to be pulled out. These studies (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Stearns & Glennie, 2006) added much-needed nuance to the experience of leaving school and asserted that the intersections of individual factors such as race, class, age and gender needed to be explored further. However, the examination of individual factors on the push and pull out of students from school paints a picture of who (students of color and low-income students) is most “at-risk” for leaving school without investigating how schools respond to and treat these students (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009).

The interaction of individual and institutional factors in school bonding. In their study on how strong bonds to school influence the likelihood of a student dropping out, Peguero, Ovink, and Li (2016) found that schools in urban areas with students from historically marginalized communities have decreased levels of school bonding. Quantitative data from their research was drawn from a survey from the National Center for Education Statistics, which follows the transition of a national sample of students in the U.S. from 10th grade through high school and then after high school. The findings from Peguero et al. (2016) support their assertion that social bonds to school (attachment, commitment, involvement, and belief) do mitigate the likelihood of dropping out of school. At the same time, the study found that students in urban areas with a higher likelihood of students from historically marginalized communities have weaker bonds to school. Peguero et al. (2016) suggest that possible racial disparities exist between school bonding and high school dropout. The study suggests that more research is needed to explore how school relationships and responses to students from historically marginalized communities can disrupt their connection to school; and thus, make it more likely for

them to leave school. This next section will explore how qualitative studies have examined the institutional factors that can affect the pushout rate and unlike the quantitative studies described here have shown how both the individual and institutional factors affecting school pushout cannot be disentangled, but are instead co-constructive (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009).

Pushout: The Silencing Epidemic

Qualitative studies that explore the issue of school pushout have taken a more critical stance on the institutional factors leading students to leave school. For example, in her study, Fine (1991) documented how school policies and processes contributed to the silencing and eventual push out of urban Black and Latinx youth from school. In particular, the qualitative studies that I will outline here use a critical theory lens to describe how institutional factors disproportionately impact students of color and poor students making them more likely to be pushed out of school. Unlike the quantitative studies described earlier, these qualitative studies operate from an epistemological framework where the individual factors and institutional factors of school pushout cannot be isolated. These studies seek to investigate the interaction between: (a) students' individual experiences and perceptions of school and (b) school-based factors and processes. "For within these interactions [in school], students' objective realities of schooling, which shape how they come to understand the (in)viability of school, are co-constructed" (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009, p. 222). Sociocultural theory explains that through the social activity of schooling and within the relationships between students and school staff, youth are co-constructing the decision to leave school. Hence, in order to

better understand the social, historical, political context of school pushout, qualitative research has examined the interaction between students' perceptions and actions and the school-based factors. Finally, Valenzuela (1999) has used the concept of cultural capital to explore the process through which schools deny important cultural and social resources to youth of color, thereby leaving them more vulnerable to dropping out. This next section will elaborate on the findings of the aforementioned qualitative studies.

Naming the silenced counternarrative. In her ethnographic study, Fine (1991) revealed how Black and Latinx youth at an urban high school were exiled and silenced by school processes, which contributed to school pushout. Fine (1991) documented numerous interactions between teachers and students, in which students, in particular low-income students of color, were shut down when voicing alternate perspectives or questioning instructions. These students were often met with humiliating reprimands and labeled insubordinate. "Those students, particularly low-income students, whose lives, self-conscious critique, or even naïve questions pierce the fragile veneer of equal opportunity, typically pay a price" (Fine 1991, p. 61). The price could come in many forms, but it was often silencing—to stop speaking up in class or be suspended for insubordination. To avoid this price, Fine (1991) noted that students stopped coming to classes and then to school entirely—in essence, these interactions in school were pushing them out.

Fine (1991) interviewed forty youth who dropped out recently and some older dropouts to see what impact leaving school had on them. The students who had recently dropped out were optimistic about their future and had maintained their budding social

critique and critical consciousness. However, older dropouts were less optimistic about the future and reported a lot of self-blame. “In a society with few mechanisms for mobilizing, sustaining, and sharpening social critique...the dropout is ultimately alone, and silenced” (Fine, 1991, p. 126). In addition, Fine (1991) revealed a counternarrative: in comparison to students that stayed in school, recent dropouts were more optimistic, less conforming, and more politically aware. This is supported by an earlier study of 88 Latinx and Black youth, which found that youth who left high school did not fit the common stereotypes about dropouts (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983). In contrast:

What emerged is a profile of the dropout who is academically average, relatively not depressed, typical in attributions of success and failure, not conforming, and most willing to resist an unjust act by a teacher. In marked contrast, the still active [in school] students parody the stereotypes of dropouts. Those still active were relatively depressed, conforming, and reluctant to take initiative on their own behalf. (Fine & Rosenberg, 1983, p. 265)

Hence, these youth are pushed out of school because it is only through leaving that youth can resist the intellectual and political conformity it requires to stay in school. One of the implications of Fine’s (1991) work is that harnessing and nurturing these youth’s social critique, perspectives, and optimism could uncover important discoveries about what schools could do to eradicate school pushout.

Revealing hidden perspectives. Unfortunately, in the seventeen years following Fine’s (1991) study, there were very few qualitative, ethnographic studies about school pushout. As previously mentioned, there was a lot of quantitative research on school

pushout during this time. However, the perspectives and perceptions of youth who left school remained largely hidden and the role of schools in pushing out youth unexplored. Perhaps this is because their perspectives challenge the status quo and the façade of meritocracy touted by the U.S. education system. In response to this research gap, Brown and Rodríguez (2009) observed and interviewed two Latino high school students who were disengaging from school on multiple occasions over the course of a school year. Similar to Fine (1991), Brown and Rodríguez (2009) found that schools do contribute to school pushout through multiple factors including: “low academic expectations and a menial curriculum, lack of caring, gendered and racialized stereotypes, and overburdened staff” (p. 239). These two students were both unwilling to conform to these demeaning and dehumanizing conditions in school and since they did not see a way to change these conditions, left school. In other words, they were pushed out. Brown and Rodríguez (2009) also noted how the school dropout of low-income youth of color was normalized, such that when these two students dropped out officially, “school life went on as if these two people never existed” (p. 240). This study is just one example of the kind of research that is needed to develop a nuanced understanding of how schools contribute to school pushout based on the perspectives and perceptions of the students experiencing it.

One recent study from Feldman, Smith, and Waxman (2017) included the perspectives and stories of six young people, who had been labeled as “dropouts,” to counter the stereotypes of young people who “dropout” and provide a deeper analysis of the challenges these young people faced in school. Feldman et al. (2017), found that relationships and a sense of belonging contributed to youth’s engagement in school while

disengaging instructional practices contributed to students' academic difficulties and eventual rejection of school. While the study prioritizes space for young people to tell their educational experience and give detailed accounts of the personal and school factors that led them to leave school, the interaction of these personal and school factors is not examined. Hence, students describe the school practices that pushed them away and the personal challenges that pulled them away from a focus on school; however, there is no critique of how school practices may disproportionately impact and push out youth with particular identities and/or personal challenges. Most notably missing is a critical take on the role institutional racism plays in the creation of a disengaging curriculum, and thus disproportionately affects the pushout rate of young people of color. Education research needs more studies, such as Feldman et al., (2017), which represent the narratives of youth from their perspectives. Yet, it also needs studies that use critical theory to explore the impact of institutional systems of power and privilege on the school pushout rate.

Subtractive schooling. One exception to the lack of critical, school-based ethnographic and qualitative research studies is the three-year study from Valenzuela (1999) who interviewed and observed Mexican youth at a U.S. high school about their orientations toward schooling and achievement. The high school in the study had a serious problem with school pushout. Over 70 percent of the high school's entering ninth graders never graduated (Valenzuela, 1999). The study found that when students dropped out of the high school, "their collective concerns get individualized with the burden of change being placed on the students themselves, as well as on their families and communities" (p. 266). In essence, the focus on individual blame kept the school from

being held accountable for the incredibly high numbers of students, in particular low-income Latinx youth, leaving the school without graduating.

Valenzuela (1999) documented how the high school was responsible for pushing out Latinx students through its assimilationist practices and policies, which she termed *subtractive schooling*. Latinx youth were “subjected on a daily basis to subtle, negative messages that undermine the worth of their unique culture and history” (p. 172). There was only one course taught on Mexican American history. In essence, the curriculum was divesting them of their Mexican identities and subtracting opportunities to further develop their biculturalism and bilingualism. The school was denying these youth access to their cultural capital while negating community cultural wealth of the youth, their families, and communities. According to Valenzuela (1999), when these Latinx youth were denied important social and cultural resources, it “leav[es] them progressively vulnerable to academic failure” (p. 3). Hence, one of the only options that the youth in Valenzuela’s (1999) study had for maintaining their cultural identity and practices was leaving school. Similarly, the youth that Fine (1991) and Brown and Rodríguez (2009) interviewed resisted conformity to unfair and unjust school practices by leaving school. If one of the only ways to maintain your identity, integrity, and humanity is to leave school, then it is not the fault of the individual. These youth are being pushed out of school and the school must bear the burden of responsibility.

All of these qualitative studies support Fine’s (1991) assertion that “those [students] most likely to leave high school prior to graduation carry with them the most critical commentary on schooling” (p. 73). Thus, in order to make the education system

and schools more equitable and just places, educational research must seek to capture these valuable critiques from youth who are pushed out. In this next section, I will review some studies that have begun that work by exploring the educational experiences of youth who have left school and returned to their education at an alternative school.

Alternative Schools: A Crucial Site for Exploring School Pushout

As long as public schools have sought uniformity, alternative schools have existed in an effort to meet the needs of certain groups of students for whom the public school system was and is not serving. Some historical examples of alternative schools include: the establishment of a network of Catholic schools in the mid nineteenth century, the Freedom schools of the 1960s, and the Black Independent School Movement in the early 1970s. According to Cable, Plucker, and Spradlin (2009), “Today, alternative schools may look different from their predecessors, but they exist because of the same philosophy: one size does not fit all” (p. 2). Alternative schools today are generally characterized by: (1) their use of different methods than those found in mainstream schools and (2) their student population, namely students who are disengaging from mainstream schools or have been pushed out and left mainstream schools (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). In 1993, there were just 2,606 alternative schools (Kleiner, Porch, & Faris, 2002). Now, the most recent report from the National Center for Education Statistics states that there are over 10,000 alternative schools in the U.S. where nearly 650,000 students are enrolled (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Despite this dramatic increase in enrollment at alternative schools, there is very little qualitative research exploring the perspectives of youth at alternative schools on mainstream and alternative education

(Chou et al., 2015; De La Ossa, 2005; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011).

Next, I will review the qualitative research that has been done to explore the educational perspectives of youth who have been pushed out of mainstream school and attend alternative schools.

Mainstream schools can learn from alternative schools. Studies from both Iachini et al. (2013) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) explored alternative school students' perspectives of their successes and challenges in mainstream education and alternative education. In their study, Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) interviewed 33 youth at an alternative school in Austin, Texas about: (1) their previous experiences in mainstream schools and (2) the differences they perceive between the alternative school where they currently attend and their former mainstream school. In the interviews, youth reported mostly positive experiences at the alternative school and described many inadequacies of their previous mainstream schools. Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) summarized their findings into six suggestions for both mainstream and alternative schools to better support "at-risk" youth. These suggestions are: (1) to focus on supportive teacher-student relationships, (2) to prioritize connections between home and school, (3) to develop strategies for improving the school climate, (4) to be flexible with school rules, (5) to train staff and provide students with wraparound mental health and social services, and (6) to use a strengths-based approach (pp. 111–113). Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011) concluded that students in alternative schools "were able to provide valuable insights into the problems that traditional schools often have in serving at-risk youth and into possible solutions offered by a solution-focused alternative school" (p. 113). While

these findings are limited to this single school in a single geographic area, they are echoed in a similar study from Iachini et al. (2013).

Iachini et al. (2013) interviewed 13 students in two focus groups who were enrolled at an alternative “urban dropout recovery charter school” in a large city in the Midwest (p. 114). The study found that “behavioral and discipline challenges”, “lack of support from teachers”, and a “lack of individualized planning for graduation” were the most common themes in what students said about why they left their mainstream school (pp. 116–117). The students’ reasons for their success at the alternative school were categorized into three themes: “individualized support for learning”, “school structure”, and a “school climate” promoting a diverse community (pp. 117–118). They highlighted two findings as “critical in any school setting”: (1) an individualized approach to learning and (2) strong relationships between teachers and students (p. 119). Hence, mainstream education can learn from the practices in alternative education. Iachini et al. (2013) conclude that preventing school pushout is dependent on understanding youth perspectives on why they disengage from mainstream schools and why they reengage in alternative schools.

Countering the negative public perception of alternative schools. Research has shown that there is a lack of belief in the value and worth of what is happening at alternative schools and the students they serve. In her study, De La Ossa (2005) interviewed 78 students from eight different alternative schools in Washington State about how their schools were meeting their educational needs. One finding was that these youth expressed concern with the negative public perception of alternative education and

frustration with how this perception mischaracterized them and their alternative schools.

According to one student:

When I wanted to transfer here, I talked to one of the counselors at the [traditional] high school where I was at and they were telling me, “you don’t want to go there, that is where all the people who can’t make it in the real world go.” I said that is where I want to go and so I came here, and they had just such the wrong perspective of this school. (p. 34)

Youth were aware of their second-class status as students in alternative schools and the second-class status of alternative schools in the education system. And yet, for the most part these youth spoke highly of their alternative schools and offered ideas for how mainstream schools could change based on the approaches and practices that were working well for them in alternative education. De La Ossa (2005) concluded “the voices of students can and should be a vehicle for the future. Ultimately, a high school is only what an individual young person perceives it to be” (p. 37). Hence, as De La Ossa (2005) suggests, youth in alternative schools are capable and highly qualified to recommend changes to the education system and design effective schools.

In direct opposition to the negative public perception of alternative schools, two studies have shown that youth from historically marginalized communities report that alternative schools are sanctuaries from their toxic and traumatic experiences in mainstream education (Antrop-González, 2011; Schwartz, 2013). Using ethnographic research methods, including participant observation, Antrop-González (2011) explored the experiences of Latinx students at an alternative high school in Chicago, Illinois. He

found that many Latinx youth saw their previous schools as sites of psychological and physical trauma, while in contrast, they perceived their alternative school as a *radical sanctuary*. As one student put it, “This school is my sanctuary...It’s hard to describe, but it’s like a load is taken off me when I’m here” (Antrop-González, 2011, p. 73). In synthesizing the findings, Antrop-González (2011) defined how a school as a *radical sanctuary*: “(a) fosters student-teacher caring relationships, (b) provides a gang-free safe space, and (c) affirms students’ racial/ethnic identities” (p. 77). In essence, these youth perceptions of this alternative school provide a counternarrative to the negative public perception and dominant narrative about alternative schools.

Culturally sustaining pedagogy. The research literature has indicated that alternative schools can affirm students’ racial and ethnic identities and thus, may provide examples of *culturally sustaining pedagogies*, from which mainstream schools can learn. Culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP) has evolved from culturally responsive teaching (Gay, 2010) to emphasize the need to support and foster multilingualism and multiculturalism in school practices (Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP pushes back on the explicitly assimilationist school practices that reproduce monolingual and monocultural policies based on White, middle class values. It represents teaching practices that foreground the ways of learning and knowledges of communities of color. For example, using hip hop pedagogy students can explore the cultural practices of hip hop, primarily from the African-American community, as a way of learning about history, as a tool for promoting social justice, and as practice for dialogue and learning for each other (Emdin, 2016). Hence, school becomes a place for sustaining the languages and cultural practices

of communities of color and how they are evolving, not just to affirm African-American students, but to promote the use of multicultural practices for all students (Paris & Alim, 2017). CSP is needed at alternative schools and mainstream schools, as will be discussed in the implications section of Chapter 5, to create a *radical sanctuary* for young people, where they feel they belong, where their identities are valued, and where the curriculum reflects their lives and prepares them for a multicultural world.

Leaving school as an act of self-preservation. Given that youth participants reported experiences of gendered and racialized microaggressions⁴, intellectually boring, monocultural curricula, and physical and emotional violence in mainstream schools, Schwartz (2013) asserted that “leaving school was probably a smart decision” (p. 111). In her educational ethnography, Schwartz (2013) focused on the perceptions and experiences of five young men of color in an alternative GED program in the northeastern U.S. to examine the school’s culture. Similar to Antrop-González’s (2011) concept of a radical sanctuary, Schwartz (2013) described this GED program as a counter-space where these young men felt seen, valued, and heard and were able to form positive relationships with each other and their teachers. Additionally, Schwartz (2013) found that this GED program was intellectually challenging and relevant to students’ lives. Hence, her findings provide another counternarrative about alternative schools, in particular GED programs: instead of being sites of rote test-preparation and low expectations, GED programs can be places of critical thinking, reflection, and high

⁴ A racial microaggression is an unconscious and subtle act of racism. Some examples include: disregarding a person, making stereotypical assumptions, lowering your expectations, and racially based insults (Yosso, Smith, Ceja, & Solórzano, 2009).

academic standards. Schwartz (2013) concludes “despite our deeply marred American education system, these [young] men still care deeply about education and made responsible choices in pursuing the GED” (p. 125). From this perspective, the decision of youth from historically marginalized communities to leave a toxic, traumatic school experience to seek out and reengage in an alternative school is a decision of incredible resilience. It takes a strong sense of agency and willpower to leave a school that does not validate, nor respect your identity, and still return to education through an alternative school. These qualitative studies have honored the perspectives, voices, and identities of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of school. However, why have they not honored their agency as potential and highly qualified changemakers⁵ in education by involving them in the research process?

Synthesis of Research Literature

Reviewing the relevant research literature shows how the conception of what it means to leave school has evolved: from a focus on the individual factors that contribute to a focus on the school factors involved in pushing students out. Finally, the research literature on alternative education has focused on youth as potential education changemakers who have made the resilient and healthy choice to leave school and have found the sanctuary of an alternative school. While the quantitative research (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Orfield et al., 2004; Rumberger & Rodrigues, 2002) has emphasized the dichotomy between individual and institutional factors that contribute to students’

⁵ Changemaker refers to a person who wants to make change, and so gathers the knowledge and resources from the community and works with others to *make the change happen*.

decision to leave school, qualitative research has sought to explore the interaction between these factors (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Fine, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). Orfield et al. (2004) made clear that the issue of school pushout was a civil rights issue because it disproportionately affects youth from historically marginalized communities. Other quantitative research (Bradley & Renzulli, 2011; Feldman et al., 2017; Peguero et al., 2015) added complexity to the issue of school pushout by affirming that there was not a monolithic process that all youth took to drop out.

Qualitative studies (Fine, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999) explored the perspectives of youth to show how leaving school was an act of resistance to the silencing, conformity, and cultural assimilation of mainstream schools. Other studies (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; De La Ossa, 2005; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan, 2011; Schwartz, 2013) have provided counternarratives to the dominant negative conception about alternative schools. According to Iachini et al. (2013) and Lagana-Riordan et al. (2011), youth at alternative schools report that mainstream schools can learn from the practices and approaches in some alternative schools. Additionally, in comparison to their negative and traumatic experiences in mainstream schools, alternative schools have the possibility to be academically stimulating, identity-affirming, and safe sanctuaries for youth from historically marginalized communities through culturally sustaining pedagogies (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Paris & Alim, 2017; Schwartz, 2013). While these qualitative and quantitative research studies have honored the voices and perspectives of youth who have been pushed out of school, they represent such a small slice of the field of educational research. Given the importance of the perspective of these youth, this research still lacks

the full recognition of their agency and potential impact on education by involving these youth in the research process itself.

Critique of Research Literature

It is a contradiction that while research has suggested (e.g. Bridgeland et al., 2006; De La Ossa, 2005; Fine, 1991) that youth at alternative schools offer an important perspective and critique of the education system, their voices have been largely ignored and unreported in the research. From a critical theory perspective, the term “alternative” education is othering and reproduces the subordination of alternative education within the political and education system. Hence, by casting students as “dropouts” and the schools that serve them as “alternative”, the critiques of the education system from students who are pushed out are effectively silenced. In her ethnography on a mainstream high school, Fine (1991) asserted, “I began to suspect that public schools were not merely organized to serve some at the expense of others. Committed to taming critique in those who stayed, schools were also exiling critique in those who left” (p. 4). Hence, alternative schools and the students they serve are less likely to be given voice in the agenda setting process for educational policy. In her study, De La Ossa (2005) concluded that it had “confirmed [her] argument that students [in alternative education] are capable of providing insight into policy structures and change in our public education system” (p. 36). By reframing youth as pushouts (not dropouts) and alternative schools as legitimate pathways to high school graduation, it may help center the educational policy agenda on the critiques and insights of these youth who have been pushed out of mainstream education.

It is thus the work of this research study and future studies to create spaces for youth who have been pushed out to speak their truth (their experience and critique of the education system) to power (those administrators, district officials, and government officers who can affect policy change in education). Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a research methodology I chose for this study because it does just that: conduct research alongside youth whose voices are on the margins and then co-create spaces to take action and for youth to speak truth to power based on their own critique and research findings. In this next section, I will review the literature on YPAR as a research methodology.

Review of Methodological Literature

Youth participatory action research (YPAR) is a research method that positions youth as co-researchers alongside adult researchers, who together seek knowledge about an important issue in their community, and then take action based on their findings (Mirra, Garcia, & Morrell, 2016; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). YPAR is grounded in the participatory paradigm and, thus, honors the inherent intelligence of and relies on the capacity and agency of the youth participants (Camarota & Fine, 2008). Additionally, it acknowledges the importance of co-constructing the research process and its findings with the youth participants as co-researchers. This shift in roles—from passive research subjects to active co-researchers—can empower youth participants to take ownership of the findings and thus create a space for them to move to social action (Checkoway & Richards-Schuster, 2003). There is precedent for using YPAR to examine youth perspectives in alternative education. Two studies in particular (Chou et al., 2016; Tuck,

2012) have exemplified the use of YPAR methodologies to explore the issue of school pushout.

School Pushout and Youth Participatory Action Research

The Gateways and Get-aways Project was a mixed-method youth participatory action research (YPAR) study of 18 months, in which Tuck (2012) worked alongside youth to design the study, collect and analyze the data, determine findings collaboratively, and report their findings. The purpose of the study was to gather youth perspectives on the value of the GED and their experience of leaving mainstream school to seek high school completion through a GED. Along with seven youth co-researchers ages 17–21, some of whom had been pushed out of their mainstream schools and earned a GED, Tuck (2012) formed the Collective of Researchers on Educational Disappointment and Desire (CREDD). Although CREDD collected both qualitative and quantitative data, I will focus my discussion of the methods and findings on the qualitative data collection and analysis. Tuck (2012) and the youth co-researchers interviewed 35 youth and older adults who had received their GED, as well as 95 other youth in focus groups. Youth co-developed the interview questions and helped interview the participants. Through their analysis of the interview transcripts, CREDD found that youth described the GED test as an emergency escape hatch from suffocating and hostile schools. Ultimately, pursuing the GED was students' refusal to "let go of their right to learn and live satisfying lives" (Tuck, 2012, p. 26). In other words, the GED provided a sense of accomplishment to youth who had been pushed out of school and in many senses been denied the sense of accomplishment of high school completion.

The use of YPAR in this study positioned youth who had been pushed out of school as experts in their own lives (Tuck, 2012). These students were not research subjects; instead, they co-designed the study, collected and analyzed the data, and helped determine the findings. One youth co-researcher wrote, “CREDD is the place to interrogate the education system that turned its back on me” (Tuck et al., 2008, p. 49). The participation of youth who have been pushed out of school emphasized the injustice of their exile and silencing by the mainstream school system. Their presence, voices, drive for justice, and impact within the research process through YPAR, “amplifie[d] the disarray, illogic, and betrayal [of the education system] in order to demand change in [educational] policy and practice” (Tuck et al., 2008, p. 64). In other words, the use of YPAR to explore the issue of school pushout validates the agency of and involves youth who have been pushed out of school, and thus can make the research more transformative.

In another YPAR study, Chou et al. (2015) also explored the experiences of students in alternative education who had been pushed out of school. Specifically, the researchers and six student co-researchers enrolled at the same alternative school inquired: “From the perspective of students in alternative education and the students who have dropped out, what helped and hindered youth retention and success in mainstream and alternative education?” (Chou et al., 2015, p. 440). This research question and the use of YPAR both indicate an underlying value in research where findings come from a youth perspective and are shaped by youth. Workshops were used to train the youth co-researchers in research methodologies, ethics, and confidentiality. These workshops also

engaged the youth co-researchers in examining their lives and developing their critical consciousness. The youth co-researchers recruited 18 participants from the same alternative school for interviews. After the interviews had been transcribed, the youth co-researchers used their experiences of being pushed out of school to analyze the data with the adult researchers. Eventually, Chou et al. (2015) and the youth co-researchers collaboratively synthesized their analysis into nine themes, which they used to create seven recommendations for the school district to improve their school system. Youth co-researchers took action on these recommendations by presenting them to school district officials and at several educational conferences. Overall, the involvement of youth in the research process through YPAR was an asset to the study because “it became accessible to participants, enhanced rigor, produced relevant forms of social action, and resulted in deeper and contextualized understanding of the incidents elicited” (Chou et al., 2015, p. 456). More importantly, this study is evidence that involving youth who have been pushed out in educational research can have a significant impact on educational policy.

Youth Participatory Action Research as a Methodology

What characterizes youth participatory action research (YPAR) as a methodology? Rodriguez and Brown (2009) identified three guiding principles of YPAR: (1) situated and inquiry-based, (2) participatory, and (3) transformative and activist.

Situated and inquiry-based. Situated refers to the fact that YPAR is grounded in the lives of the youth participants and in their experiences and histories around an important issue within a specific historical, political, and social moment. Tuck (2012) referred to YPAR as a set of beliefs about knowledge. In other words, YPAR seeks to

“return to the people the legitimacy of the knowledge they are capable of producing through their own verification systems... as a guide to their own action” (Fals-Borda and Rahman, 1991, p. 15). YPAR is inquiry-based because the research is founded on the questions, problems-posed, and theories that youth bring from their own experiences. Through their exploration of an issue important to them, youth check their own theories against formal theories from research, question dominant structures of power and privilege, and develop their own critique and worldview—their critical consciousness (Freire, 1970; Mirra et al., 2016; Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

Participatory. Participatory refers to the crucial participation of the youth throughout the research process alongside the adult researchers, instead of as objects of the study. As previously described in Chapter 1, the adult researcher researches *with* the youth co-researchers, instead of *on* them. Tuck et al. (2008) assert that YPAR is research that requires that “our whole selves [be] involved because lots of kinds of skills and thinking are needed, not just one” (p. 51). Both YPAR research studies described earlier, involved the youth co-researchers as co-authors in book chapters and educational journal articles about the study (Chou et al., 2015; Tuck et al., 2008). Youth co-researchers are involved throughout the research process—design, data collection and analysis, and determination and presentation of findings. Hence, YPAR interrupts the typical separation between the researcher and the researched. As a result, this can create tensions and discomfort around the negotiating and sharing power within the research (Rodríguez and Brown, 2009). These tensions will be further discussed later on in Chapter 3 when I address my role as the researcher.

Transformative and activist. Finally, YPAR is transformative and activist because it seeks to take action based on the findings of the research in solidarity with the youth. The participatory paradigm of YPAR values knowledge that gives communities the practical understanding to flourish; additionally it affirms their sense of agency to use this knowledge to make change in their lives (Guba & Lincoln, 2005). At the heart of YPAR is the belief that “eliminating disparities demands a research practice within the emancipatory perspective that fosters the democratic participation of community members to transform their lives” (Wallerstein & Duran, 2003, p 29). In other words, it is not enough just to research with youth. The research findings of YPAR are evidence from which youth, and in solidarity with the adult researcher, can make demands and take action to create change around the research problem. Additionally, YPAR is transformative because it can create a bridge between the voices of youth on the margins and the dominant research sphere. Hence, the youth and adult co-researchers are transforming this dominant research space to include the ways of knowing and experiences of youth, in particular youth from historically marginalized communities, thereby changing what is considered legitimate research (Mirra et al., 2016). Given the purpose and research questions of this study, using YPAR methods means that youth from historically marginalized communities can use their experiences and what they learn as co-researchers to advocate for educational change to eradicate pushout.

Rationale for YPAR methods. In this study, I am expressing my commitment to social justice and to fighting to create a more just system of education alongside youth who have been pushed out. Thus, I see YPAR as fundamental to this study because of its

commitment to seek justice and transformative change with people from historically marginalized communities. I also see YPAR as fundamental to this study because it is a decolonizing research methodology, which facilitates the expression of silenced voices and makes space for youth to represent their experience in genuine and authentic ways (Smith, 2012). The use of YPAR methods helped this study and its findings to work in solidarity *with* youth who have been pushed out of school to push for changes in the education system that will help prevent additional youth from being pushed out in the future.

Summary of Review of Literature

Research suggests that the issue of school pushout is a complex civil right issue that disproportionately impacts youth from historically marginalized communities. While a few qualitative research studies exist, overall, there is a dearth of research on the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out of mainstream schools and how they reengage in education at alternative schools. In particular, research from the youth's own perspectives and voices is largely absent from the literature. Consequently, the research is consistently missing the voices of youth from historically marginalized communities, such as the voices of Black and Latinx students themselves (Bautista, Bertrand, Morrell, Scorza, & Matthews, 2013). Also sorely missing are the voices of the youth from working class backgrounds. Additionally, the research literature has critiqued how mainstream schools push out students and synthesized what is working for these youth at alternative schools (Chou et al., 2015; De La Ossa, 2005; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2013; Tuck, 2012). However, there are few

examples (Chou et al., 2015; Tuck, 2012) of youth involvement in taking action as a result of the findings of these studies. Hence, this research study chose to use youth participatory action research as a methodology and involved youth who have been pushed out of school as youth co-researchers throughout the research process.

Chapter 3: Methods

“Now we all know we have something in common. We all know we're not alone. We all know we can do it.” (Speaking about the group interviews, Olivia, Interview 9, June 5, 2017).

Informed by sociocultural theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Vygotsky, 1978), community cultural wealth (Yosso, 2005), and the work of leading critical education theorists (Duncan-Andrade & Morrell, 2008; Freire, 1970; hooks, 1994), this study sought to counter the silencing of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of schools. Hence, the purpose of the study was to explore the educational experiences of youth, in terms of their own perspectives, who have been pushed out of school. In particular, the study focused on the experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities in terms of their perceptions of what prevented their success in mainstream schools, and in contrast, what helped them succeed in an alternative school. Based on the narratives generated by the youth who have been pushed out, this study offers recommendations for eradicating pushout from schools. Using Freire's (1970) concepts of problem-posing education, critical consciousness, and social action, this study was built on the assumption that foregrounding the voices and perceptions of students who have been pushed out of mainstream schools, leads to more authentic data and findings. As stated in Chapter 1, the goal was to research *with* (not *on*) youth by involving them as co-researchers, positioning them as authorities of their own educational experience, and building an awareness of the systemic issues that lead to school pushout as a way of moving to social action (Camarota & Fine, 2008). For this

reason, the research methods, described in the next section, were built around the importance of youth involvement throughout the research process.

Research Methods

The methods of this study attempted to: (1) make societal power structures transparent to both those who benefit and those who are oppressed by these systems, particularly in education; and (2) interrupt research practices that typically benefit dominant groups while excluding the subordinate ones. In this next section, I will introduce how my research was guided by qualitative research methods. Additionally, I will discuss and justify how this study used qualitative methods within a youth participatory action research (YPAR) methodology in order to stay centered on the voices of youth from historically marginalized communities and to represent these voices authentically.

Qualitative Research Methods

Qualitative research uses a variety of approaches to capture people's experiences and perceptions in ways that cannot be quantified. Qualitative research does not seek to generalize findings based on a multitude of collected data; instead, it bases findings on the richness and depth of a handful of perspectives from a particular time and place (Glesne, 2016). Valid and trustworthy qualitative research is defined by long term involvement and rich data that provides a detailed, revealing picture of people, situations, events, and processes (Maxwell, 2013). Participant observation over long periods of time and intensive interviews that seek depth over breadth are just some reliable qualitative

research methods for collecting data about people's perceptions and experiences of the world.

Qualitative research also rejects the idea of objectivity and recognizes the biases and subjectivities that researchers inherently bring to their research. Hence, the validity of qualitative research is not measured by how its methods remove researcher bias since that is impossible. "Instead, qualitative research is primarily concerned with understanding how a *particular* researcher's values and expectations may have influenced the conduct and conclusions of the study...and avoiding the negative consequences of these" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124). In essence, valid qualitative research requires that the researcher reflect on their biases and be transparent about the potential effects of these biases on their research. Overall, qualitative research methods seek a deep and revealing understanding of people and their experiences within a specific time and place, while naming and recognizing researcher subjectivity and bias.

Rationale for qualitative research methods. In order to present a detailed picture of the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out, as well as their perceptions of the education system, qualitative research methods are needed. Given the deficit of research on the educational experiences of these youth written from their perspectives, it is important to gather their perspectives in ways that are in-depth and captured in their own words. Specifically, I employed qualitative research methodologies, such as the collection and analysis of field notes, reflections, and interviews, the details of which will be elaborated on later in this chapter.

Additionally, qualitative research methods are a strong fit because the focus of the research questions is on a very specific population. The study centered on youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of school and now attend a specific alternative school, and thus is not a generalizable study. Instead, this is an intense case study of youth advocacy within the education system. On the one hand, the findings of this study are limited to the specific students in this time and place. And on the other hand, the findings will humanize these youth by recounting their educational experiences using their own words, instead of representing them more generally as mere statistics (Gerstein, 2010; Paris, 2011). Although qualitative research methods can be humanizing, these methods have also been used “at worst, to pathologize, exoticize, objectify, and name as deficient communities of color and other marginalized populations in the U.S. and beyond, and at best, to take and gain through research, but not give back” (Paris & Winn, 2014, p. xvi). The use of YPAR methods helps transform qualitative research methods into humanizing and decolonizing research methodologies.

Rationale for qualitative research methods within YPAR. Intensive youth participation in the data collection and analysis process within YPAR helps to decolonize qualitative research methods. Solórzano and Yosso (2009) assert that too often qualitative research methods from the dominant culture have interpreted and explained the experiences of people from marginalized communities, in particular people of color. As a result, this research has been deficit-based, incomplete, inaccurate, misleading, but also it has been harmful, silencing, and damaging to these communities. YPAR interrupts positivist research paradigms that claim objectivity and validity and do harm. Instead,

YPAR asks scholars and researchers “to get ‘close’ to our work” (Stovall, 2013, p. 292). Hence, I did not collect and analyze the qualitative data (youth’s educational experiences and perceptions) in isolation. Youth decided (alongside myself) “what was significant, how it was significant, and how it should be discussed” (Pizarro, 1999, p. 56) using their knowledges and experiences as youth who, like the participants we collectively interviewed, had been pushed out of school. Consequently, I did not tell the student participants’ stories for them, so that I would not colonize the knowledges and educational experiences of the student participants. In other words, youth had the authority in the data collection and analysis process to help decide the narratives that were shared in the research as they interpreted the findings with me. This practice is a *decolonizing research methodology* (Smith, 2012) and part of what Pizarro (1999) called a *social justice research methodology*. If the purpose of this study was to explore the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out from their own perspectives, then who better to be a part of the data collection and analysis than these same youth?

At this point, I want to refute those who may say that youth involvement in the data collection and analysis undermined the validity of the study. On the contrary, I believe it speaks most strongly to the trustworthiness and validity of the study’s findings. Drawing from the sociocultural theories of learning, knowledge is co-constructed through shared activities and interactions; thus, epistemologically, our biases and values affect what we can know and ontologically, our reality is socially constructed (Glesne, 2016). As is true in qualitative research, the youth and I did not intend to try methods that would help us to escape our biases and subjectivities; instead we embraced and named them. As

an *outsider* and a young, White middle class woman, I have a particular lens I use to analyze the data that will impact how I interpret it. The youth came from the same school community and share in some of the same experiences and backgrounds as the student participants who were interviewed. By contrast, involving youth as co-researchers, meant that the methods of investigation and data analysis happened through the lens of an *insider*, and thus foregrounded the importance of valid perspectives and interpretations. Hence, the youth perspective and involvement in the qualitative data collection and analysis strengthened the study and trustworthiness of the findings (Chou et al, 2015; Tuck et al., 2008). Next, I will describe these youth co-researchers and participants and locate this study in its particular context.

Participants

Participants of the study were youth ages 18-24 who attended a local school, the Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS—a pseudonym), where I currently teach. Building a trusting relationship between the researcher and participant youth co-researchers is crucial in YPAR (Mirra et al., 2016; Wallerstein & Duran, 2003); therefore, I recruited volunteers for the role of youth co-researchers (YCRs) from BAS because I already had the foundation of mutually trusting relationships with students. I recruited seven YCRs. Compared to the demographics of BAS, women were slightly overrepresented amongst the YCRs and White students slightly under represented. In fact, despite my initial thinking that it would be more difficult to recruit women at BAS, because they are more likely to have parenting and childcare responsibilities after school, the majority of the YCRs identified as women.

As a part of the recruitment plan, I presented the YCRs with the realistic time commitment and necessary responsibilities of being a co-researcher. These responsibilities included meeting for (1) one hour a week within the school day; (2) one and a half hours twice a week; and (3) one four-hour long meeting per month at BAS or another offsite location⁶. I provided transportation for the monthly meeting at the offsite location. The total time commitment was about 20 hours per month. YCRs committed to this schedule from early March 2017 to June 2017 (see Appendix A for research timeline). Four of the initial seven co-researchers and I continued to meet from August 2017 through October 2017 for further data analysis and to share our findings and interpretations at conference presentations. Two of these YCRs continued to meet with me once a month in December 2017, January 2018, and February 2018 to engage in member checking the student participant counternarratives and sections of the dissertation (see Table 6 later in this chapter and Appendix A for a more detailed timeline). Altogether, since March 2017, the YCRs and I have met over 60 times, for at least one to four hours, for a total of nearly 140 hours of work. Once the group of seven YCRs was formed, we created democratic ground rules for attendance and participation together. Table 1 below shows our agreements/norms/ground rules and the consensus we came to around missing meetings, how to inform the group, and how to make up missed work. In the next paragraph, I will discuss how this consensus shifted as we continued to meet and how we handled the attrition of YCRs.

⁶ While we usually met at BAS, a few times we met at a local café.

Table 1

Agreements/Norms/Ground Rules and Consensus on Meeting Participation

Agreements/Norms/Ground Rules	Consensus on Meeting Participation
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speak your truth—keep it 100⁷ • No judgment • Willingness to be outside comfort zone/no pressure to share • Maintain confidentiality • Listen with intent to learn • Respect the mood of the space • Conversation, not interrogation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Come to all meetings • If you must miss a meeting, then let the group know (reply all to an email to let us know) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ First missed meeting: Talk with the group ○ Second missed meeting: Make a plan with the group or individually with Jessica (depending on the situation) ○ Third missed meeting: Meet with Jessica about commitment, may not be able to continue as co-researcher

Due to the unpredictable and sometimes volatile nature of the lives of students enrolled at BAS, the YCRs sometimes needed to miss meetings for very legitimate reasons (i.e. because of family, their health, and balancing work and school). Although we had set somewhat strict guidelines about meeting participation (see Table 1), as we built our researcher community, we decided that once someone was a YCR, they were always a YCR, and could always come back and attend a meeting. This decision speaks to the bond that was formed between the YCRs and myself. There was also attrition with the YCRs. Table 9 (on page 127 of Chapter 4) shows which YCRs were involved in the research at each point in time of the research study. It is important to note that this attrition did not reflect a lack of interest or commitment on the part of these YCRs,

⁷ “Keep it 100” was the students’ words and means being honest, true, and real, as well as being yourself no matter what.

simply that they needed put more time toward other priorities, such as working, their mental and physical health, and/or support of their families. For example, one YCR, who left after a month and a half into the research study, earned his GED and decided that he needed to get full-time work, which prevented him from being able to attend the meetings. Collectively, we decided not to invite other students to become YCRs when one YCR left. We decided that we had done so much work to form our community and strengthen our relationships with each other, it would impact the group dynamic to bring on someone new.

It was important to honor YCRs' potential need to work and to value their commitment of time and effort (Mirra et al., 2016). I offered a small stipend of \$800⁸ to YCRs as an honorarium and provided refreshments at all meetings outside of the school day. All YCRs were given a consent form to agree to participate in the study (Appendix B), which included permissions for audio recordings of our meetings, audio recordings of the interviews, and the use of their written reflections and notes taken throughout the research process in their researcher notebooks. The consent form also gave these students the opportunity to be named (or remain anonymous) in the study if they choose. All of the YCRs chose to be named and not use pseudonyms. Hence, the YCRs can be listed as co-authors when (as I hope) we write an article together about our research for educational journals and other publications after the dissertation phase. Table 2 below presents the demographic information about each of the YCRs and Table 3 presents the observed characteristics of the YCRs, which two of the YCRs and I co-wrote.

⁸ I was able to continue to pay the four YCRs who continued to meet from August to October 2017. They earned \$10 per hour for their work during this time.

Table 2

Summary of Youth Co-Researchers' Demographics

Name	Age	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Aspirations	Start Date at BAS	Time Participated as YCR
Bee	19	Female	Latina	Tattoo Artist, piercer	January 2017	4 months
Irisa	18	Female	Latina and African-American	Pediatrician, youth mentor	August 2016	On-going (about 1 year)
Lulis	18	Female	Latina	Entrepreneur, study computer science	October 2016	On-going (about 1 year)
Maria	20	Female	Latina	Psychologist	October 2016	8 months
Shania	19	Female	Native American	Pediatrician	April 2016	4 months
Sk8 (Nash)	23	Male	African-American	Paleontologist	October 2016	8 months
Noah	18	Male	White	Work part-time while going to college	January 2017 (second time at BAS)	1.5 months

Table 3

Summary of Youth Co-Researchers' Observed Characteristics

Bee	A thoughtful, passionate, and creative young woman. At her previous schools, she was made to feel stupid despite the fact that she found the curriculum patronizing and unchallenging. She has a strong spirit that drives her to do what she knows is best for her, not what others tell her to do or what society says she should. She is a no bullshit person, meaning she is not going to fake it if she is not feeling it. Bee stayed true to herself, maintained her integrity, and only participated when she could authentically be present in the interviews and co-researching meetings. While Bee took a break from co-researching to take care of herself and her mental health, her commitment to the project remained solid. It took a lot of courage for her to speak up in front of her peers and it sometimes caused her anxiety. She was an excellent note-taker and helped to synthesize information across interviews, so that we could create stronger, more specific questions for the third interviews.
Irisa	Caring, empathetic, funny, and talkative with an incredibly memorable laugh. Her Christian faith and family are very important to her. She was the heart of this project and vulnerable throughout this process both in co-researching meetings and during the interviews. Her courage to tell her story and be authentic about what she was going through, helped and inspired us all to be brave to share more with each other. She would often be the one to initiate a conversation about how the YCRs and I were feeling when we needed to process the emotions and difficult thoughts that these interviews were bringing up for us. She believes her previous school neglected her, did not hold her accountable, and let her fail without giving her the supports, encouragement, and push she needed. She went through a lot during this researching project, including serious health issues, several deaths in her family, and financial instability.

Lulis	Extremely dedicated, reliable, and true to her word. Her family is deeply important to her. She is very trustworthy, honest, and stubborn at times. She is guarded with her trust, but opened up to the co-researchers and myself after time. She did not feel cared for at her previous schools and found the curriculum uninteresting. She felt teachers would stereotype students and judge them. After time, she began to not care about school. After she graduated from BAS, she continued to come in for the research project and never missed a meeting or presentation. Empathy in the interviews was very important to her and she was very committed to representing her peers' ideas accurately in the presentations. She kept us on track in the co-researching meetings and made powerful connections between ideas across the interviews. She pushed herself out of her comfort zone and faced her fears by presenting in front of others.
Maria	Good listener, seems to be an "old-soul," and has a quality about her where people will just talk with her. Proudly identifies as a lesbian. She is true to herself and her identity and expresses that through her tattoos. She was a high school graduate when she started at BAS and felt that she learned more at BAS than she did in the four years of her high school. She has dyslexia and rather than support her, the teachers at her previous school would just let her pass classes and tests without knowing the material fully. She worked hard and wanted to learn the material, so she came to BAS to learn what she felt she had missed. She balanced school, multiple jobs, and family responsibilities throughout the time of this research project. She showed confidence and readily expressed her opinions in meetings and in the presentations. She encouraged and guided the other co-researchers when they were struggling.
Shania	Very quiet and observant. A creative artist who loves pandas. She is proud of her Native heritage. Although she did not always express a lot in words, her presence was felt and her sweet smile would get the rest of the co-researchers smiling too. Previous schools had misjudged her quiet demeanor for a lack of understanding, when in reality there was deep and critical thought happening for her. She had to step back from co-researching after the summer in order to focus on her health, but she remained committed to the research. As one of the co-researchers put it, "everything she said was gold," because it was always thoughtful and carefully considered if she chose to say it out loud.

Sk8	Self-motivated and brave with a big imagination and a bigger heart. He is a scholar and critical thinker. A survivor who left his entire family in Chicago to escape the violence there. At his previous schools, he felt judged, unchallenged, and was consistently put in lower level classes. At those schools, he experienced harsh discipline policies, which he believed were used to push him out since he refused to conform. He is creative and expresses himself through art, spoken word, rap, and poetry. During the research project, he experienced homelessness, financial instability, and more than one death in his family. He was a leader in the research project and a very loyal friend to many students at BAS. As one co-researcher said, “He is so funny and is also real and authentic. I can really trust him. He is legit and always has something to offer.”
Noah	Self-aware with a great sense of humor. Although he was only a part of the project for a little over a month, he was a strong part of the team while he was there. He had great ideas about how to set-up the group interviews and how to present our study to the BAS student body. He recognized his White, male privilege and would acknowledge how his school experiences were different from the other co-researchers because of these identities.

The YCRs and I recruited and interviewed eight student participants who all attended BAS. In the procedures section of this chapter, I will describe in more detail how the YCRs and I recruited the student participants. All of the student participants, except one, chose not to be named and they were given a pseudonym. When possible the student participants chose their pseudonyms. In general, the demographics of the student participants reflected the demographics of BAS, in terms of gender and racial/ethnic identities, with White students slightly overrepresented. Table 4 summarizes the demographics of the student participants and their participation in the interviews. As shown in this table, not every student participant was interviewed the same amount of times. As with the YCRs, this is because the student participants could not attend all of the interviews because of other important priorities, such as work and supporting their

families. Two of the student participants, Martin and Peter, earned their GEDs and left BAS to start full-time jobs to support themselves and their families. Two of the student participants were interviewed one-on-one either because of preference (Ricky) or timing logistics (Manny). Table 5 presents the observed characteristics of the student participants and was co-written by two of the YCRs and myself.

Table 4

Summary of Student Participants' Demographics

Name (Pseudonym)	Age	Gender	Race/ Ethnicity	Aspirations	Start Date at BAS	Interviews Participated in
Ame	18	Female	White	Go to college to become a doctor	January 2017	Interview 1 Interview 2 Interview 7
Friday	18	Female	White	Enroll in a cosmetology program after beach bumming	January 2017	Interview 3 Interview 5 Interview 8 Interview 9
Manny	18	Male	Latino	Artist, performer, rapper	January 2017 (second time at BAS)	Interview 10 (one-to-one)
Martin	18	Male	Native American	Join Laborer's apprenticeship, continue boxing	January 2017	Interview 3 Interview 5
Olivia	18	Female	African-American	Chef and/or lawyer	January 2017	Interview 1 Interview 2 Interview 6 Interview 7 Interview 9
Peter	18	Male	White	Go to college	October 2016	Interview 3

Ricky	18	Gender Fluid	White	Join the Carpenter's union as an apprentice	January 2017	Interview 3 Interview 4 (one-to-one) Interview 8 Interview 9
Xavier	21	Male	African	Own and run his own barbershop	January 2017 (second time at BAS)	Interview 1 Interview 2 Interview 6 Interview 9

Table 5

Summary of Student Participants' Observed Characteristics

Ame	Blunt and direct. Has a maternal disposition and offered support to fellow students during the interviews. Would call students at BAS to make sure they were coming to school on time. A leader on the Student Advisory Board at BAS. Introverted, but outspoken. She is learning Korean and plans to travel to South Korea someday.
Friday	Creative and unconventional. Beats to her own drum and a rhythm of her own. Said a lot with few words during the interviews. Great sense of humor. Pushes on rules in smart ways, for example the dress code at BAS, to find a way to be herself.
Manny	Full of energy and an infectious enthusiasm that vibrates off of him. Empathetic and interested in other people's stories in order to connect with people from many different walks of life. Spiritual and interested in metaphysics. A quick learner and an excellent rapper and performance artist.
Martin	Creative and artistic. He has a strong love of drawing. Very laidback with a chill attitude. Loyal to his friends, always points out what is not right, and committed to supporting his family. Excellent boxer and considered boxing as a career.
Olivia	A big supporter of this research study and wished she could have been involved from the beginning as a co-researcher. She attended one of our conference presentations in order to support her partner. Enthusiastic, open to sharing, and internally motivated/driven. Often one of the first to answer a question in the interviews. Her willingness to share her story encouraged others to speak up more. She supported and encouraged other student participants and asked her own questions in the interviews.

Peter	Not afraid to speak his mind and at times sarcastic. Very outspoken with a sense of humor that sometimes got him into trouble. Strongly opinionated. A leader on the Student Advisory Board at BAS.
Ricky	Polite, short, and direct. Thoughtful and empathetic to needs/viewpoints of other students. Showed courage by participating in the interviews. To calm their ⁹ nerves, they often brought a Rubik's cube or fidget spinner into the interviews. Strong sense of self and a strong self-advocate. A leader on the Student Advisory Board at BAS. As the YCRs described them: "so beyond resilient, there are not words for it."
Xavier	Very responsive and encouraging to his peers throughout the interviews. Deeply committed to his family and strongly identifies with his faith as a Muslim. A leader on the Student Advisory Board at BAS. A great listener and also asked questions in the interviews. An avid soccer player. Very mature, caring, and aware of other people's needs. He immigrated to the U.S. as a young boy and speaks multiple languages.

Context

This study took place at an alternative school, BAS, in Portland, OR. The school serves around 100 youth ages 17-25 each year. There are on average about 50 students enrolled at a given time since every three months, a new group of students enrolls, while another completes their year and graduates. While it provides academic support for high school completion with most students earning their GED, the students also spend about half of the time on a work site gaining valuable job-related skills either in the technology or construction industry. During their time at BAS, students receive one on one support from one of three licensed clinical social workers on staff and are also assigned a career coach based on their career interests to support their growth in the program and placement after graduation. On average, youth in the program have been out of school for

⁹ Ricky identifies as gender fluid and uses the pronouns they, them, their.

two years before enrolling in BAS. The composition of the current BAS student body is: 38% Caucasian, 31% Latinx, 22% African-American, 2% Native American, and 7% Asian American. The current student body is 39% female and 61% male¹⁰. In terms of age, 86% of BAS students are 17-21 and 14% are 22-24 years old.

Although it is impossible to describe a typical BAS student, it is important to note that many students at BAS have experienced or currently experience instability and trauma outside of school. This instability and trauma may include: homelessness, domestic violence, sexual assault, drug and alcohol abuse, witnessing or being a victim of other forms of violence or abuse, and/or the illness or death of a family member. Some of the youth at BAS are parents or have childcare responsibilities and/or need to work to support their families. I say this not to add to the deficit narrative about these youth and their communities, but to clarify their realities and to emphasize the resilience of these youth. As one of my students once told me, “The staff need to understand we come from dark places” because to know her, to understand her without judgment, she needed staff to know her lived reality.

Procedures

Throughout this section, I will highlight how the youth co-researchers (YCRs) influenced the research questions and research methods. However, I put some boundaries on the YCRs’ decisions and influence, so that: (1) the purpose of the study would remain unchanged; (2) any changes to the research questions would only be slight

¹⁰ These demographic categories are problematic and designated by the school district and grant organizations that fund BAS. Youth at BAS are able to identify themselves in greater detail in terms of their gender and race/ethnicity, but these identifications are not included in how BAS represents and makes available its demographic data.

modifications and would not deviate from the essential purpose of exploring the perspectives of youth at alternative schools on the education system; and (3) research would be qualitative in nature with interviews, field notes, and written researcher reflections as the main instruments. Overall, there was no push back from the YCRs to change the purpose of the study or the qualitative methodology. Additionally, the YCRs decided not to make any changes to the research questions.

Mirra et al. (2016) asserted that adult involvement in YPAR does not take away from youth agency. “Setting young people off on a research project without access to the resources, knowledge, and relationships that adults can provide can do a disservice to YPAR by denying students the necessary tools to reap the full benefits” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 39). By setting the boundaries listed above, I was better able to guide YCRs with the resources, support, and mentoring to both complete a YPAR project and to take necessary actions around our findings.

Initial Work: Building Relationships and Developing Our Critical Consciousness

Before we began collecting and analyzing data, the YCRs and I spent four weeks with three goals in mind:

1. To build our community and strengthen our relationships;
2. To learn more about and discuss critical theory and educational inequities; and,
3. To come to a collective consensus about the research questions and methods.

Much of these foundational procedures were based on the YPAR work at the UCLA Council of Youth Research (Mirra et al., 2016). In the next sections, I will give a general outline of how I, with the YCRs, accomplished the goals listed above as well as the

rationale for prioritizing them (see also Table 6 and Appendix A for the detailed research timeline).

Building our community of practice. YPAR is vulnerable work and requires a supportive environment with a foundation of trust, love, and respect for young people (Mirra et al., 2016). The foundation of trust, love, and respect was not only necessary between the youth co-researchers (YCRs) and myself, but also between the YCRs and within themselves. This foundation starts with getting to know each other; and thus, the first four weeks (March 2017) included activities where the YCRs and I shared about ourselves. For example, the YCRs and I shared our personal story about our names, wrote at least six words to describe ourselves as learners, and we each created a symbol to represent the people, places, and things that have shaped us as who we are. Then, we took our words and symbols and put them on a poster together inside of a circle to represent our community of practice and group identity as researchers who seek a more equitable education system. Figure 3 shows a picture of this community of practice poster. We kept returning to our poster and later added our group name and mission statement, which can also be seen in the figure. Lave and Wenger (1991) define a “community of practice” as groups of people who come together around a shared purpose to learn. In the case of this study, we were centered on the issue of school pushout, which affected all the YCRs collectively, but we also looked at the issue from our different perspectives as unique individuals.

At the end of March 2017 and after much discussion, we finalized our research team name and mission statement. Collectively we brainstormed a list of words that we

Hand-drawn circular diagram representing a 'DREAMER' profile. The circle is divided into segments by lines radiating from the center. Clockwise from the top, the segments are:

- Youth Perspective ~ Resisting Injustice** (top arc)
- Systems of Education** (right arc, with a drawing of a person thinking)
- Through** (bottom arc)
- Unders Funding** (left arc)

Inside the circle, the central text reads: **Determined, Resilient, Equitable, Activists, Motivated, Ed Researchers DREAMERS**

To the left of the center is a red-outlined box containing:

- HARD WORKER**
- Strong Curiosity & Growth**
- Fast Learner**

To the right of the center is a drawing of a person with a lightbulb above their head, with the text: **SH3** and **Every day, I am inspired and motivated to do my best**

Other text around the circle includes:

- Shania Open-minded**
- MOAH**
- The always appreciated being, I am not just a dreamer**
- Jessica Determined, dedicated hard-working risk-taking open, listening**
- Luis Student of Life**
- See** (with a drawing of a person's head)

Figure 3. Our identity as a community of practice.

As discussed in Chapter 2, sociocultural theories of learning suggest that we learn through our interactions with others as we engage in shared activities (Vygotsky, 1978). Thus, what we know is shaped by our relationships, in addition to the specific histories we each embody in terms of time, places, and the mental and physical tools we use. For example, I see music as a tool that many students use at BAS to relax and heal, to connect with others, and to represent themselves. Irisa, for example, always loved playing music during our meetings and music became one tool for us to build community, share, and learn from each other. Overall, in the first four weeks, emphasis was placed on the YCRs learning from each other to build group solidarity and also to validate that their experiences as students were important sources from which we can co-construct knowledge of school pushout.

A secondary purpose of these activities was to disrupt traditional classroom spaces where caring is not at the forefront. Noddings (2007/2013) reminds us that there is a need to educate students as whole persons in U.S. schools. In part this means addressing who is in the room and what is going on for these young people outside of the school walls. Hence, the YCRs and I had formal and informal ways in which we took time to check in on how we were doing (our ups and downs) both individually and as a collective. For example, at least once a week we would start our meetings by sharing a rose (great moment) and a thorn (low moment). Valenzuela (2005) asserts “youth prefer to be *cared for* before they *care about* school” (p. 91); however, youth may have a different definition of caring than their teachers. Hence, as a group we took time to listen to each other about what respect and caring looked like to each of us and what kind of

support we felt we needed from each other. We sought to build in the kinds of supports we needed within the time we had together. As an example, at times we abandoned the meeting plan or modified it, when there was a pressing issue, struggle, or triumph that one of the YCRs needed to share or discuss.

According to Freire (1970) a “climate of mutual trust” is built through love, humility, and faith (p. 91). As described above, our community of practice built this mutual trust through intentional shared activities, which demonstrated: (1) the love we committed to supporting and caring for each other; (2) the humility to say that, individually, we did not have the all answers, but that we could learn from each other; and (3) the faith that we had and still have the capacity to make change in the education system.

Developing our critical consciousness and civic identities. Youth co-researchers’ (YCRs) faith in their ability to make change was strengthened through activities in which we critically looked at the world and educational inequalities. Mirra et al. (2016) emphasized that beyond using research to take action, YPAR is about creating space where youth empowerment and development is the number one priority. As a result, YCRs and I engaged in reflections and dialogue about educational, social, historical, political, and economic inequalities to deepen what Freire (1970) called our critical conscious and our civic identities—who we would like to be as active citizens. Modeled after Freire’s (1970) critical pedagogy, the YCRs engaged in “problem-posing education” (p. 79) in which we read about, reflected on, questioned and dialogued about inequalities through readings, videos, and activities.

My intention was to bring in readings and videos from non-mainstream sources with the purpose of emphasizing multiple perspectives, validating non-academic knowledge, and ensuring that all students had access to the ideas we discuss. Appendix D shows a list of these readings and videos, including my rationale for using them. Rodríguez and Brown (2009) recommended the use of multiple modes of engagement in YPAR projects, so that all students regardless of academic skill level can fully participate. Students were encouraged to connect the readings, activities, and videos to their own experiences. Hence, together we positioned the knowledge and experiences of the YCRs as legitimate and worthy of investigation, which is fundamental to YPAR (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009).

As is characteristic of critical pedagogy, this curriculum foregrounded the voices, experiences, skills, and ideas of the YCRs as valid and valuable to our co-constructed understanding of educational inequalities in Portland and in the US that push students out of schools. According to hooks (1994), “If experience is already invoked in the classroom as a way of knowing that coexists in a nonhierarchical way with other ways of knowing, then it lessens the possibility that it can be used to silence” (p. 84). In essence, if YCRs were treated as objects to be filled with knowledge, then the curriculum would silence them and their valuable perspectives. Instead, this curriculum sought to engage YCRs in constant critical reflection of the education system based on their experiences and with the understanding that they are a crucial part of transforming it (Freire, 1970). They were “critical co-investigators in dialogue” with me, who had as much to learn (if not more) from them, as they did from me (Freire, 1970, p. 81). YCRs and I reflected regularly on

these readings, activities, and videos both in writing in their researcher notebooks¹¹ and through group discussions. In these reflections, YCRs connected what they learned to their own experiences. At the same time, they developed their ideas for taking action to change the education system. In other words, the YCRs were further developing their critical consciousness—their own critique of the world and their role as changemakers in transforming it (Freire, 1970). Some of the activities that the YCRs and I engaged in included:

- learning about the history of racial inequity in Portland;
- collecting and learning about oral histories from family and community members to develop a list of our cultural funds of knowledge;
- discussing microaggressions within the education system and the YCRs personal experiences with them;
- connecting personal experiences to larger social, political, historical, and economic factors influencing students to leave school;
- collectively questioning what gets taught in school and the recent youth-led effort to get ethnic studies taught in Portland Public Schools;
- discussing the boundaries of Tuck's (2012) definition of pushout and co-creating our own definition and word for this concept;
- attending a lecture series and discussing the ideas from Professor Jeff

Duncan-Andrade of San Francisco State University, and Professor Gloria

¹¹ Youth co-researchers received a notebook on the first day. In this researcher notebook, they recorded their thoughts, ideas, and reflections throughout the research process. These written reflections were part of the data that was analyzed for the study.

Ladson-Billings of University of Wisconsin, Madison, that were most significant to us.

The emphasis on youth voice and agency is important given the deficit framework within the education system that dismisses and silences youth from historically marginalized communities. As mentioned in Chapter 2, these YCRs were harnessing what Yosso (2005) calls their community cultural wealth. By treating YCRs' educational experiences and voices as assets and invaluable insights for our understanding and critique of the educational system, I hoped to counter the deficit framework about these young people and their communities. Ultimately, as the YCRs and I developed our critical consciousness through YPAR, we were also asking ourselves the question: What is research for?

Creating our collective research plan. During the third and fourth weeks (late March 2017), the YCRs vetted the research plan outlined here in Chapter 3. During the third week, the YCRs and I discussed the following two questions: (1) What is education for? and (2) What defines an effective education to you? To initiate this conversation, we looked at the Problem Tree that Tuck (2008) and the youth researchers in her YPAR study co-created to display both why and how the New York City school system was not working. The YCRs connected with this visual representation of problems in education and eventually we made our own Education Problem Tree, which will be shared and discussed in Chapter 5. After this discussion, we shifted into a conversation about our research methods and how we could best collect the educational perspectives of other

youth who have been pushed out of school. We also talked about ideas for eventually sharing our research findings and taking action.

As we finalized our plan for the interviews in late March and early April, the students were very concerned about making sure that the student participants would feel comfortable during the interviews. We talked about what food to bring for the interviews, how to set up the room, what questions to ask, how to ask them, and how much we should participate in the interviews by sharing our own stories. The idea that we wanted to co-create a space of empathy with the student participants began to emerge. We watched a video on the difference between empathy and sympathy from Brené Brown (see Appendix D) and the YCRs decided that to show empathy, they would also share their educational experiences in the interviews to build solidarity with the student participants and make the interviews more conversational. The YCRs also decided that we needed to make clear that the student participants could have a choice of doing a group or one-on-one interview. In addition, Sk8 came up with the idea to give each student a thank-you card after each interview to appreciate and support them (see Appendix G for an example of one of the thank-you cards). Finally, the YCRs gave me their initial feedback on the interview protocol I created for the dissertation proposal. We continued to edit and refine the protocol in the following two weeks (see Appendix E and Appendix F).

Data Collection and Analysis

In this section, I will detail the methods we chose and the steps we took for data collection and analysis. Before diving into the details, I will start with a brief summary to

give a sense of the scope of the data collection and analysis of this study. We recruited and interviewed eight other youth at the same alternative school about their experiences in both mainstream and alternative schools along with their perceptions of the education system. The interviews were audiotaped. The youth co-researchers (YCRs) and I listened to the audio of these interviews together and individually. After each interview, we would debrief immediately to talk about how we thought the interview went, discuss any feedback from the student participants and for each other, and what we wanted to do differently for the next interview. At this time, we also engaged in initial data analysis and discussed what ideas in the interviews were coming up for us as significant. The audio recordings of the interviews were transcribed (by me) and we also analyzed them for key themes. An important part of our data analysis involved returning to the student participants in later interviews to clarify what they said, ask follow-up questions, and member check our initial findings and themes. We also asked student participants what they thought was most significant about what they said in the interviews, and thus what recommendations they had for future changes to the education system.

Finally, YCRs and I co-created themes and recommendations, which we presented to future and current teachers and administrators at several presentations from June 2017 to October 2017. One of those presentations was to the BAS staff and students, in which we made a specific recommendation for change to the school. Table 6 presents a brief description of the plans, procedures, and data collection methods for each week of the study (see Appendix A for a more detailed version of the research plan). In the following sections, I will detail the ways in which the YCRs and I approached this

research plan, such as how we developed research skills and tools, recruited other students to interview, conducted the interview process, and analyzed our data.

Table 6

Research Plans, Goals, and Data Collection and Analysis By Week

	Week	Activities	Themes/Goals	Data Collection Instruments and Measures
March 2017	Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Set democratic ground rules for participation Reviewed timeline for project and consent to participate Created researcher notebooks Wrote six words about ourselves as learners and created a symbol to represent us Read, reflected, and discussed personal educational experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create community Share personal education experiences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Field notes Written reflections
	Week 2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created a community identity poster by putting our six words and symbols together Examined how YCRs' experiences can serve as counternarratives about what it means to "drop out" Discussed larger social, economic, historical, and political root causes of school pushout Reflected on what it means to take civic action 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create community Locate pushout within a larger context 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Field notes Written reflections
	Week 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Created a research team name, and mission statement Discussed: What is education for? What defines an effective education to you? What problems do we see in the current education system? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Create collective research group identity 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Field notes Written reflections

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Practiced interviewing with family/community member 		
	Week 4	(Spring Break) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Discussed research plan • Made initial revisions to interview protocol • Prepared for and practiced introducing study to rest of student body at BAS 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clarify research plan together • Create presentation to introduce study to BAS students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections
April 2017	Week 5	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduced study to BAS students • Reviewed and collected feedback from interviews with family/community members • Interviewed each other about educational experiences using our draft of the interview protocol as a guide • Discussed how to make interviews comfortable and build empathy • Began recruitment and scheduling of interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Launch study • Practice interview skills • Finalize interview protocol 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections
	Week 6	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First group interview of students at school in Group A • Gathered feedback and engaged in initial data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First group interview • Debrief interview process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews
	Week 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation from professor about ethics of research from decolonizing perspective • Second group interview of students at school in Group A • Gathered feedback and engage in initial data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ethics discussion • Continue interviewing • Beginning data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews

	Week 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • First group interview of students at school in Group B • Gathered feedback and engaged in initial data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue interviewing • Continue data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews
May 2017	Week 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Second group interview of students at school in Group B • Gathered feedback and engaged in initial data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continue interviewing • Continue data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews
	Week 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No interviews scheduled • Celebrated work • Reviewed interviews so far to prepare important points to return to/clarify in third interview • Wrote additional questions for third interview 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation for third group interviews • Self-care 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections
	Week 11	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No interviews scheduled • Gathered feedback and engaged in initial data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers • Watched Precious Knowledge documentary 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued preparation for third group interviews • Continue data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews
	Week 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Third and final group interviews of Group A • Gathered feedback and engaged in initial data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers • Finalized June presentation dates 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final group interview • Reflect on experience • Data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews • Member checking
	Week 13	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Third and final group interview of Group B • Continued with data analysis • Reflected on experiences as researchers • Began preparing presentations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Final group interview • Reflect on experience • Data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping group interviews

		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Co-constructed themes (findings & recommendations) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking
June 2017	Week 14	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued with data analysis • Returned to student participants for member checking • Interviewed some student participants about their experiences • Co-constructed themes (findings & recommendations) • Created demands/ recommendations of education system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis • Create demands of education system 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Written reflections • Audiotaping interviews • Member checking
	Week 15	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalized presentation • Presented at local university to future teachers • Co-constructed themes (findings & recommendations) • Documented our YPAR experience through interviews 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Preparation for final presentation of demands • Present 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Audiotaping our reflections about the YPAR process
	Week 16	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presented our findings and recommendation for change to BAS staff and students • Gave gratitude and appreciation to each other • Discussed next steps after summer 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present • Give each other gratitude • Plan next steps after summer break 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation materials
July 2017	Summer break			
August 2017		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews • Continued data analysis • Prepared for upcoming presentations • Began co-constructing counternarratives and refining our co-constructed themes • Presented at local university to future teachers about our YPAR methods 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present • Data analysis 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation materials

September 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews • Continued data analysis • Prepared for upcoming conference presentations • Continued co-constructing counternarratives and refining our co-constructed themes • Began synthesizing findings with Education Problem Tree • Spoke with Jeff Duncan-Andrade via Skype 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prepare conference presentations • Data analysis • Synthesize findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation materials
October 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews • Synthesized the findings and co-constructed themes by finalizing our Education Problem Tree • Continued co-constructing counternarratives and refining our co-constructed themes • Finalized conference presentations • Attended and presented at the Teaching with Purpose Conference the Northwest Teachers for Social Justice Conference 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present • Data analysis • Synthesize findings 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation materials
November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No meetings with YCRs • Completed all transcriptions • Analyzed YCR reflections in the researcher notebooks • Continued compiling counternarratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis 	
December 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis and member checking of counternarratives with YCRs • Discussed their experience doing YPAR and presenting findings • Continued compiling counternarratives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis • Member checking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking • Discussions about YPAR with YCRs

January 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis and member checking of counternarratives with several student participants and YCRs • Discussed experiences presenting at conferences with YCRs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis • Member checking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking • Discussions about YPAR with YCRs
February 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Read counternarratives and sections of the dissertation together for member checking • Wrote descriptions of YCRs and student participants 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Data analysis • Member checking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking • Discussions about YPAR with YCRs

Developing our researcher identities and tools. Throughout this YPAR process, youth co-researchers (YCRs) developed the skills, tools, and confidence to see themselves as a team of researchers, to interview fellow students, to draw conclusions about the data once they analyzed it, and to present their research with pride (Mirra et al., 2016). Since a large part of the data collection required that students be familiar and comfortable with interviewing, we spent a couple of weeks practicing interview skills and applying what we learned to finalize our interview protocol. One way the YCRs practiced was by interviewing two community or family members about their educational experiences, including taking notes and writing a reflection about the experience. In addition to developing students' interviewing skills, it also served to emphasize the importance of oral histories, community cultural wealth, and a generational perspective on education and educational inequity (González et al., 2005; Ladson-Billings, 2009; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). The YCRs also practiced their interview skills by interviewing each other and several BAS staff members about their educational experiences. With this practice, we: (1) learned more about each other's and staff's educational experiences, (2) built

comfort and confidence in using the interview protocol, and (3) tested it for any needed changes.

After these interviews, the YCRs shared their perceptions and takeaways from these experiences, for example, questioning techniques that worked well, what was comfortable or uncomfortable about the process, and what they would do differently next time. Using these experiences and through collective dialogue, the YCRs and I updated and made changes to the interview protocol (see Table 7 and Appendix E). We also gained insight into how we could best set up the group interviews from the feedback we got from BAS staff. We decided that we would disperse ourselves around the group interview table, instead of having all of us across the table from the student participants. This change helped to make the group interviews much more conversational, informal, and comfortable for the student participants. It is important that the YCRs had the opportunity to make changes to the interview protocol because they had insights into what language would be most understandable to their peers as well as ideas for how to ask questions to better elicit the information we were seeking (Chou et al., 2015).

At the start of Week 5, the YCRs and I presented our YPAR study to students at Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS). We introduced our YPAR project to students at the community meeting that happens every Monday at BAS. During our presentation, we:

- Introduced the purpose of our study
- Explained why we are collecting this data, how we planned to do it, and the actions we planned to take with the findings
- Talked about confidentiality

- Led small group discussions after watching spoken word video “Somewhere in America” to get students’ initial thoughts and perceptions of education system
- Collected feedback from students about how they would prefer to be interviewed and any ideas they had for questions we could ask
- Recruited students (18 and older) who were interested in being interviewed

In the week following our presentation, we checked-in with all the students who said they were interested in participating to confirm and continued to recruit other participants, in particular youth who were absent for the presentation. The following week, one of the BAS staff members explained and shared the letter of informed consent for students who were 18 or older to indicate their interest in participating in the interviews. An example of the letter of informed consent for student participants is found in Appendix C. We recruited eight student participants. Once we knew who had consented to participate, we divided the student participants into two groups (A and B) and scheduled times and dates of the group interviews. As the study progressed, we changed these dates and times as needed. These interviews took place during the more flexible study hall time at the end of the school day.

During Weeks 5 to 7 (see Table 6), the YCRs and I also spent time talking about the necessity and essentiality of issues relating to confidentiality and ethics in research. The Institutional Review Board (IRB) had asked all of the YCRs to sign a Confidentiality Contract (see Appendix H), so that the YCRs and I had an agreement about how we would handle the information shared by the student participants in the interviews. While I

thought this was an unnecessarily formal step and an indication of a lack of the trust of the YCRs on the part of the IRB, it brought up an important discussion on trust. One of the YCRs, Lulis, did not want to sign the contract initially because she honestly did not think she could agree to let me know if she decided to leave the study. When I asked her about this, she said it was because she did not fully trust me yet. This conversation became a rich discussion about trust, which I will go into more detail about in Chapter 4, and ultimately ended up deepening the level of trust between the YCRs and myself. We also spent our first class of the seventh week learning about the fundamentals of ethics, the need for confidentiality, and bias in assumptions. A Portland State University professor presented about the ethics of research from a decolonizing perspective. Then, we discussed potential ethical dilemmas in our research plan and made any needed changes.

Interviews as counternarratives. At the heart of the data collection and analysis methods in the study was the concept of a counternarrative. Counternarratives center on the knowledge and experiences of the oppressed, which are often hidden and silenced (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). During the interviews, YCRs and I: (1) bore witness to the injustices that student participants have faced in their schools; (2) spoke with participants about the greater social, historical, political, and economic context of school pushout; and, (3) co-constructed a counternarrative that pushes back on the dominant narrative of what it means to be a “dropout.” Throughout the research process, the YCRs co-constructed knowledge and theory from the personal experiences and stories of the student participants, their peers. Using their insider knowledge as students who have been

pushed out of school, YCRs made determinations about what was significant in the interviews. Through our data analysis process, the YCRs and I co-constructed themes to represent a collective, but polyphonic counternarrative about school pushout from the words, perspectives, and lived experiences of the student participants and YCRs. As detailed later in Chapter 4, I took our interview transcripts, findings, and co-constructed themes and compiled counternarratives for each of the eight student participants, which were member checked by some of the YCRs and student participants. Finally, YCRs and I synthesized what we heard in participants' counternarratives into recommendations that demand for changes to the existing education system. The rest of this section will detail the data collection and analysis methods from which YCRs and I co-constructed these counternarratives, themes, and recommendations.

Interview protocol. The goal of the interview protocol was to be semi-structured, so that it felt much more like a conversation than a formally scripted interview. The YCRs and I had a few key questions or topics to cover in the interviews (experiences at the alternative school, experiences in mainstream education, and perceptions of what should change about the education system). However, there was a lot of leeway for the YCRs and I to ask follow-up questions (see Table 7 for the interview protocol). As a result of this leeway, Table 8 (Appendix F) shows a summary of the interview questions that the YCRs and I actually asked in the interviews. Overall, we found that we asked fewer questions, but were still able to get answers to most of the questions in our original interview protocol in Table 7. The YCRs shared their educational experiences with the interviewees to stimulate dialogue and increase the comfort of the interviewees. The

interview protocol was arranged into three sections for each of the three group interviews. Each of the group interviews lasted between 40 and 60 minutes. It was enough time for the conversation to go deep and for everyone to have time to speak. As stated earlier, the eight students who consented to participate were split into two groups based on their school schedules. Each of these groups (Group A and Group B) participated in three group interviews. Not all students participated in every one of the three group interviews because of other priorities they needed to handle outside of school (see Table 9 in Chapter 4 on page 127 for more details). In Week 14, we interviewed some of the student participants about their experiences being interviewed. In Week 15, I interviewed the YCRs about their experiences doing YPAR. In total, the YCRs and I spent about nine hours interviewing youth participants over nine weeks. Additionally, all of the interviews were audio recorded.

My rationale for using group interviews was that many youth would feel more comfortable interviewing with peers and it would create a space for free flowing dialogue and meaning making between the youth participants and YCRs. In their YPAR studies, Mirra et al. (2016) found that group interviews allowed youth researchers “to move more flexibly into collective dialogue with their participants” and that “mediating talk between their friends and peers, allowed for unique exchanges that adult researchers are often unable to gain” (p. 81). In my experience, students often feel more comfortable being interviewed along with fellow peers with whom they have a positive relationship. As a result, the atmosphere of the interview turns into that of an informal conversation and as students get inspired from each other’s thoughts and ideas, the conversation becomes

richer. The interview becomes a dialectical exchange and relationship, in which the interviewers and interviewees are in a continual process of meaning making (Brenner, 2006). When the YCRs and I interviewed some of the student participants, they described how they felt more comfortable talking in the interviews because of the YCRs. For example, one of the student participants, Friday, asserted that the group interviews:

Felt more comfortable because it wasn't only just a teacher. Not saying I only see you, [Jessica], as just a teacher. But just in general. Cuz it's...students who are also helping lead it. And then students who were being interviewed" (Friday, Interview 9, June 5, 2017).

Hence, the YCRs' involvement and leadership in the group interviews helped yield more valuable, unique, and in-depth information on the student participants' perspectives and experiences.

Each group interview had at least one YCR present and the majority of the group interviews had two YCRs. The YCRs and I discussed whether I should be present at all of the group interviews and decided that I should. So, I was also a part of every interview. As mentioned earlier, two of the interviews with students were one-on-one. One student participant, Ricky, requested to do a one-on-one interview with me because of the sensitivity of the information that Ricky was sharing. Another student participant, Manny, did a one-on-one interview with me because of scheduling logistics and it was the only time he was available.

There was a progression to each of the group interviews, to allow participants to build trust with the process and with us. The first group interview centered on

participants' current experiences at the alternative school and it also included time to review the study and let participants ask any questions. The second group interview centered on participants' previous experiences in mainstream schools, the circumstances that led them to leave school, and how they saw or defined themselves (as a "dropout," "pushout," or another term).

After the first and second group interviews, the YCRs and I had two weeks where we did no interviews (see Table 6). We used these weeks to identify and gather statements made by participants that we wanted to bring back to the group to: (1) discuss further, (2) member check with the group around the significance of the statements, and/or (3) use to lay the groundwork for a conversation around what demands/recommendations participants have for changing the education system. Thus, the third group interview involved reviewing and clarifying statements from the previous interviews, as well as, engaging participants in a conversation about what must change about the education system based on their experiences.

Table 7

Interview Protocol

Group Interview 1

- Review the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews. Participants given the opportunity to ask questions.
- Experiences at an alternative high school
 - What do you like about this school? What works for you here?
 - What does not work for you here? What do you wish was different here?
 - What is success for you? Has the meaning of success changed at this alternative school? Tell me more.
 - What is different about this school and the high school(s) you attended that is most important to you?
 - What (or who) motivates you in school?

- How did you find out about this alternative school?
- Anything else about this school?
- What about your parents'/caregivers' experiences in school? How did you learn about it? Has it impacted your experience? Tell me more.

Group Interview 2

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Experiences in mainstream high school
 - What brought you here to this alternative school? Have you tried other alternative schools?
 - What led you to leave your mainstream school? Be specific.
 - Tell us about your high school. What did you like about your previous (mainstream) high school? What worked well for you there?
 - What did not work for you at your previous (mainstream) high school? What prevented your success there? Tell us about an event.
 - Anything else about your mainstream high school experience that you will always remember (positive or negative)? Friends? Teachers?
- How do teachers affect the way students act and vice versa?
- What are your thoughts on the term dropout? Does it define you/your experience? Have you heard of the term pushout? How would you define/describe your experience of leaving school?

Group Interview 3

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Tell me more about what you meant when you said _____ (excerpt from the previous two interviews).
- What was most significant about what you heard from the group in the last two interviews about their experience in school? What stands out to you?
- In your own words, how would you define the purpose of school? (i.e. What is education for?)
- Do you think that the education system needs to change? Why or why not? What must change in the education system? Is it possible for the change to happen?
- If the entire education system were redesigned, how would you rebuild it if you were in charge?
- What do you hope for your children's or future children's education?
- If someone from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), or the principal at your previous school, or the U.S. president was here, what would you offer as insight into the changes that need to be made about to the education system, in general or particular to Portland?

Table 8

*Summary of the Questions Actually Asked in the Group Interviews***Group Interview 1**

- Review the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews. Participants given the opportunity to ask questions.
- Experiences at an alternative high school
 - What do you like about this school? What works for you here?
 - What does not work for you here? What do you wish was different here?
 - What is success for you? Has the meaning of success changed at this alternative school? Tell me more.

Group Interview 2

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Experiences in mainstream high school
 - What brought you here to this alternative school? Have you tried other alternative schools?
 - What led you to leave your mainstream school? Be specific.
 - Tell us about your high school. What did you like about your previous (mainstream) high school? What worked well for you there?

Group Interview 3

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Tell me more about what you meant when you said _____ (excerpt from the previous two interviews).
- Instead of calling yourself a dropout, how would you describe yourself as a learner in six words?
- What do you think about the idea of dropping out being a success?
- If you could change one thing about your high school experiences, what would it be?
- How did you know that your teachers didn't care? What did that look like?
- Describe a time when you experienced racism or sexism or homophobia at your school.
- Favorite teacher. Why? Least favorite teacher Why?
- How often did you see yourself—people of your racial and cultural background in the school/curriculum?
- Appreciations—gratitude circle

In Weeks 6–9, we completed the first and second group interviews with both groups of student participants. After each of the group interviews, we used our meeting time together to reflect and debrief on the interviews. For debriefing purposes, we asked questions, such as:

- What is going well with the interviews?
- Are we getting the information we want?
- What changes do we want to make?

We also began some initial data analysis by asking ourselves:

- What is coming up for us that is significant?
- How does what we hear fit with our expectations and our own educational experiences?
- What surprises are there?

Hence, the YCRs and I continued to reflect on our experiences as researchers and on what we were learning from the interviews. We discussed various ethical dimensions, such as confidentiality. We discussed how to keep the information that students shared confidential within our research team conversations and how we stored our data to keep it private. I kept any field note observations and reflections from YCRs and myself, as well as flash drives containing audio data, in a locked drawer in my home office or a locked drawer when I was at school. All electronic content was on my password-protected laptop.

During Weeks 10–13, the YCRs and I prepared for and completed the third group interviews with each of the two groups. We had to do two third group interviews with

Group A to accommodate students' schedules. During Weeks 10 and 11, we reviewed the interviews we had conducted for what was coming up as significant for each of us. We gathered statements from the interviews that we felt were significant or needing of clarification to bring back to the groups for the third follow-up interviews. We also collected statements made in the previous group interviews that would help lay the foundation for a discussion about what needs to change in the education system. Finally, we updated our interview protocol and developed questions to ask the student participants in the third interviews that would help clarify, validate, and expand on our initial themes coming from our on-going data analysis. During this time, I began to transcribe the interviews and the YCRs reflected and wrote about their experiences as researchers and what they were learning from their peers in the interviews.

Data analysis. After completing the third group interviews in Weeks 12 and 13, we shifted our focus into data analysis and preparing for the presentations of our findings. Starting in Week 13, we began to co-construct generative themes and outlined some initial recommendations and demands for change in the education system in Portland and in general. Again, it bears repeating that since this study sought to research *with* the YCRs, our data analysis process was developed organically and collectively with YCRs because they had voice and agency in deciding how we analyzed the data. Our process followed Freire's (1970) model of problem-posing education—an iterative process of asking, reflecting, discussing, and developing recommendations for action (Mirra et al., 2016). When analyzing the data, the YCRs and I found ourselves going through a cyclical process of reviewing the data, asking what is significant to us, going back to our own

field notes, reflections, and educational experiences, discussing it together, going back to participants for member checking when possible, and then repeating this process.

According to Freire (1970), “Problem-posing bases itself on creativity and stimulates true reflection and action upon reality” (p. 84). Hence, to arrive at demands and actionable steps, we followed a very reflective and intuitive data analysis process, in which we continually asked:

- What themes do we see emerging?
- What is significant to us in the data?
- Why is it significant to us?
- How do our own personal educational experiences fit with what we heard (as evidence) from student participants?
- What can we do to make the education system better based on our own experiences?

We asked these questions over and over again as we looked at our own field notes and reflections in our researcher notebooks; as we read the transcriptions and listened to the audiotapes of our interviews with each other; and as we talked to participants for member checking. This process is also what Maxwell (2013) refers to as triangulation, or the use of evidence from multiple forms of collected data (field notes, written reflections, and interviews) to validate the findings.

The goal of our data analysis process was “meaningfully integrating and placing value on the emic (or ‘insider’) perspectives of those most directly impacted by the problem under investigation” (Irizarry & Brown, 2014, p. 78). Clearly, the YCRs were

very much involved in identifying what is significant in our data, synthesizing that into findings, and then creating recommendations and demands of the education system. Nevertheless, through member checking and the third group interviews, some of the student participants had an opportunity to speak to our initial findings and recommendations for change in education. In Chapter 4, I provide more details about this member checking process, involving both student participants and YCRs, as well as how I compiled coherent and cohesive counternarratives representing the student participants' educational experiences and perspectives on the education system. Although time did not permit us to member check with every student participant and YCR, we tried to speak with the majority of them. First and foremost, we wanted to honor whether the participants consented to let us use their words and whether they believed it accurately captured their voice.

Data analysis and member checking continued all the way into February 2018 (see Appendix A for a detailed research timeline). The purpose of our initial data analysis in Weeks 13–16 was to co-construct preliminary findings, themes, and recommendations to share with future and current teachers and administrators during our presentations in Weeks 15 and 16. However, data analysis, member checking, and taking action through presenting our findings continued into the fall of 2017 and through the winter of 2018. From August 2017 through February 2018, four YCRs and I:

- Continued to analyze and discuss significant themes in the interviews
- Discussed our experiences doing YPAR and presenting our findings
- Refined and honed our co-constructed themes

- Member checked the student participants' counternarratives that I compiled with their guidance
- Met with four of the student participants for them to member check their counternarratives
- Member checked parts of the dissertation, in particular, what I wrote about how they described their YPAR experience
- Synthesized our findings to create our Education Problem Tree (see Figure 5 and Table 13 in Chapter 5)
- Presented our findings, co-constructed themes, and recommendations for educational change at two education conferences and at a local university

In Chapters 4 and 5, I will provide more detail about these data analysis processes.

However, here I will say that one of the most powerful moments during this time was reading parts of the dissertation with two of the YCRs who were able to meet in the winter of 2018. In a previous research study (Burbach, Martin, Arnold-Fowlkes, Sakaith, Julius, and Hibbs, 2016), we had several sessions in which student participants and I read out loud what myself and a colleague had written about our study and what the student participants had said. We found that this process helped to make sure we had accurately captured what the students said and had written about it in a way that made sense and was understandable to the student participants. Reading the part of the dissertation where I wrote about how the YCRs described their experiences doing YPAR, was validating and meaningful. The two YCRs affirmed that I had captured their experiences accurately and

were impressed by how much they had accomplished and were transformed over the 11 months of this research study.

Taking Action

One of the most impactful experiences for the YCRs was taking action to present our findings, co-constructed themes, and recommendations for educational change to future and current teachers and administrators at a local university, at BAS, and at two education conferences. As described in Chapter 2, one of the guiding principles of YPAR is that it is transformative and activist, such that it seeks to “intervene into and transform knowledge and practices in ways that improve the lives of marginalized youth” (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009, p. 30). In fact, taking action based on research findings and hence positioning youth as agents of change is what sets YPAR apart from student voice research, which simply creates space for youth voices (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). In Weeks 15 and 16, the actions that the YCRs and I committed to were presenting our findings and recommendations for changes to the school system to future teachers at a local university and to staff and students at BAS.

In both of these presentations, we shared our findings, co-constructed themes supported by quotes from the student participants, and recommendations for educational change. In Chapter 4, I will provide even more details about these presentations, as well as how the YCRs described their experiences presenting. In their YPAR project, Mirra et al. (2016) asked youth to create demands for educational change in order to emphasize the urgency of educational change and the very actionable steps that we all can take. Similarly, during our presentation to BAS staff and students, we made a single

recommendation, that the program do a better job to support young women in the program, with several actionable steps. While Chapter 4 will provide more details from the students' perspectives, these recommendations were carefully and thoughtfully considered by the staff and, since the presentation, all of the actionable steps have been taken.

During August and October 2017, four of the YCRs and I presented at a local university about our YPAR methods and at two education conferences. In order to prepare for these professional presentations, we wanted to refine our co-constructed themes, as well as, synthesize our findings into more visual and artistic expressions of what we were recommending should change about the education system. For our presentation in August about our YPAR methods, the YCRs and I created binders filled with all the artifacts of our research process, including examples of our researcher notebooks, our interview protocol, and community of practice identity poster. Instead of presenting the whole time in front of the teachers, each of the YCRs presented the artifacts in the binder to a smaller group of the teachers. This presentation strategy was more comfortable to the YCRs and allowed them to make more direct connections with the teachers at the presentation. We also synthesized our findings into our Education Problem Tree (see Figure 5 and Table 13 in Chapter 5), which became an important visual tool for communicating what we believe needs to change most about the education system and the underlying belief systems that perpetuate toxic school environments. Finally, Sk8 wrote a spoken word poem based on our Education Problem Tree, which we shared at these presentations. His spoken word poem will be at the closing of Chapter 5.

These visual and artistic representations of the research findings, as alternative modes of knowledge sharing, were how the YCRs and I played with normalized presentation structures.

For each of our presentations the YCRs and I created either a Prezi or PowerPoint presentation to document our experience of the YPAR process, our findings, and our demands for changes to the education system. Always at the forefront of our presentations were the words, voices, and perspectives of the student participants and YCRs. Their quotes from the interviews and stories were the evidence to powerfully support our findings, co-constructed themes, and recommendations. Through presentations—a more traditional means of sharing research—YCRs had access to dominant ways of influencing ideas about education of those in power. Nevertheless, their presence, voices, and demands for change disrupted the ways in which these presentations for educational change are often about youth, but rarely are involved with nor led by youth.

I view these presentations as the first steps toward taking action on behalf of the research. I hope that the YCRs and I continue to take other steps. There are many creative ways in which YPAR projects have taken action including: a youth developed professional development workshop for teachers (Mirra et al., 2016); a youth-designed feedback system for students to hold schools accountable (Yang, 2009); and a guide written by youth and for youth about the GED and school pushout (Tuck, 2012). Now in my new role as the Education Manager at BAS, I would like to involve the YCRs and other students in possibly implementing some of these YPAR-inspired ideas at BAS. In

the future months, I would also love to write an article with the YCRs about our YPAR experiences and/or perhaps a manifesto or letter from students to teachers about what, as students, they want and need from teachers. It is also my hope that our actions lead others to take action and perhaps for continued work and steps to be taken with me alongside future students at this alternative school.

Instruments and Measures

As previously described, the primary qualitative data collection instruments in this study were: field notes, written reflections (my own and YCRs'), and the group interviews. The triangulation of these three separate instruments adds to the validity that these instruments have measured what they were supposed to and strengthens the findings. In addition, the intensive, long-term involvement, rich data, and respondent validation were just three strategies found in this study for increasing the credibility of findings and interpretations in qualitative research (Maxwell, 2013). First, YCRs and I already brought a depth of experience and knowledge about the alternative school to the study. This study required an intensive, long-term commitment throughout the nearly eleven-month research process, which lent trustworthiness to our findings (see Appendix A for research timeline). Second, the data collection procedure involved gathering rich, in-depth counternarratives, which helped us to more fully capture and do justice to the entirety of each participant's story within a particular time and place. Third, these qualitative research instruments and measures were informed by decolonizing research methodologies that put experiential knowledge at the center, so that people from historically marginalized communities spoke to their own experiences and their

knowledge was legitimized (Solórzano & Yosso, 2009; Smith, 2012). Finally, with respondent validation and member checking we can be more confident that we have not misinterpreted, distorted, or silenced these youth through the use of these particular instruments and measures.

Role of the Researcher

While I have worked at this alternative school for nine years, I am an outsider in many ways because I grew up and lived in a different world within the same city as the youth at the school. I must acknowledge my privilege as a White, middle class woman, who had largely positive experiences in high school where I felt I could be myself, where I was never targeted or disciplined, where I felt intellectually challenged, where my ways of knowing and values were supported, and where I received praise and high marks for my academic abilities. These strong grades, academic confidence, and high expectations from my parents led me to believe that I would belong and do well in college. I also received scholarships because of my grades that allowed me to go to the college of my choice. My academic successes are a strong part of my identity and yet they are inextricably linked to the privileges I have undeservedly received from my Whiteness and middleclass-ness. Additionally, I am privileged to be a graduate student seeking my doctorate in education. As a White, middle class, cis-gender, able-bodied researcher, I am aware of the potential to be a colonizer, who takes information from historically marginalized groups, dehumanizes them by treating them as subjects, and benefits while doing harm and trauma to them. This section is about the steps I took to mitigate the potential for my research to be colonizing by reflecting on my own power and privilege,

by taking action in solidarity with the YCRs, and through the use of decolonizing methodologies.

Reflective

Throughout this study, I negotiated the dynamics of my own power and privilege with the YCRs. As a result, I continuously reflected on how this power and privilege played out in the research by writing in a field log. Researchers generally call this reflexivity: a “critical reflection on how the researcher, research participants, setting, and research procedures interact and influence each other” (Glesne, 2016, p. 145). However, rather than viewing researcher reflexivity as a way to speak to the trustworthiness of my research methods and findings, I highlighted what Pillow (2003) calls “reflexivities of discomfort” (p. 188). In other words, my researcher reflexivity names the uncomfortable tensions and limitations that arise when researching with youth where there is unequal power and privilege. As Brown and Rodríguez (2009) have asserted, it would be inauthentic to idealize power sharing in YPAR, instead they encourage “researchers to talk more about the dilemmas of conducting research among individuals who are unequally positioned within society and to the research itself” (p. 3). There are ways in which my power and privilege benefited the study, for example my network and access to resources allowed the YCRs and I to present our findings to important stakeholders in education. And yet, my power and privilege also meant that I have been complicit in and benefited from the current education system. The combination of power and privilege is complex and thus requires deep awareness, constant vigilance, and reflection. It also means that I have a responsibility to name the discomfort in researching with youth

across differences in power and privilege while being transparent about how it has impacted our interactions, the research methods, and our interpretations. In Chapter 4, I will further discuss these discomforts and their impacts on the research study.

Activist

This research did not pretend to seek objectivity. As a mathematics teacher, I am incredibly influenced by the words of Gutiérrez (2009): “Teaching mathematics is not a politically neutral activity” (p. 11). These words are echoed by Freire (1970) and hooks (1994), who asserts “no education is politically neutral” (p. 37). Similarly, I believe that research, and in particular this study, is political and activist in nature. According to Mirra et al. (2016), the work of YPAR “must be tied to acting upon (or renaming) the world to make it a more just, equitable, and humane place to inhabit” (p. 23). As a researcher, I was responsible for co-constructing a space with the YCRs where they can speak truth to power, where they can speak their demands of the education system to key stakeholders, and where they can speak to their knowledge and experiences through our research. Let me be clear, I am and was not the white savior trope shown in countless Hollywood movies. As a White woman, I have greater access to power in our racialized and gendered social system; however, the historical legacy of White women, in particular White women teachers, has been to reproduce white supremacy by speaking for their students of color and supporting the narrative that these students need to be rescued (Leonardo & Boas, 2013). I intentionally worked to counter this narrative and I refused to be seen as the White, woman educator who comes in to save poor, oppressed youth because this trope only serves to reify the deficit perspective of these youth and

disregards their potentiality to be agents of change. Freire (1970) states, “authentic education is not carried on by ‘A’ *for* ‘B’ or by ‘A’ *by* ‘B,’ but rather by ‘A’ *with* ‘B’” (p. 93). Likewise, this study was in solidarity *with* youth not *for* or *on* behalf of youth. This means that while what I heard from youth about their educational experiences may have given me ideas for what changes to demand of the education system, I deferred and privileged those demands and ideas for educational change that came from the interpretations of the YCRs. And yet, it is not enough to challenge social injustices through the research. The epistemologies and methodologies of the research study must also interrupt social injustices, which have been reproduced by doing research *on* historically marginalized communities, and therefore decolonize (Pizarro, 1999).

Decolonizing Research

For whom is this research? While I acknowledge that this research is my dissertation and for my doctorate in education, it is also for making change and for making demands of the education system with the very youth that the system has pushed out and silenced. While critical theory helps us name the educational inequalities, when it comes to taking action against these educational inequalities, decolonizing methodologies help us to take action against these inequalities without reproducing them. Hence, it is imperative that this study not add to the body of “qualitative research that has reproduced, if contradiction-filled, a colonizing discourse of the ‘Other’” (Fine, 1994, p. 70). Consequently, this research study was informed by decolonizing research methodologies and is “written in ways that attach lives to racial structures and economies, and construct stories and analyses that interrupt and reframe the victim-blaming mantras”

(Fine, Weis, Wessen, & Wong, 2000, p. 108). I was committed to being vigilant about interrupting the ways in which this study could be twisted to reify the victim-blaming dominant dropout narrative and deficit perspectives of youth of color and from poor and working class communities; and thus do them harm.

First and foremost, I sought to decolonize research in this study by putting the voices, experiences, and knowledges of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of school at the center. Additionally, a small group of these youth were co-researchers with influence on the direction of the study. These youth also had authority over what stories were ultimately told through the research and were used as evidence for the demands we made of the education system. Hence, this study sought to blur the line between researcher and researched, since I researched *with* co-researchers who are themselves part of the community of youth who have been pushed out of school. It was in direct contrast to colonizing research, where the researcher researches *on* the researched as though they are objects, and which at best has told superficial stories about historically marginalized communities and at worst enacted and justified violence against these communities. Smith (2012) names participatory action research as a decolonizing methodology because it centers on the “concerns and world views [of the community being studied] and [the community] then coming to know and understand theory and research from...[their] own perspectives and for...[their] own purposes” (p. 41). Although Smith (2012) is speaking specifically about research with indigenous communities, her ideas are salient within this study’s context doing YPAR with youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of

schools. Within YPAR, youth are given access to the research tools and theories of the elite, dominant culture, but inevitably influence and shape the knowledge-making process by foregrounding their own knowledges, experiences, and practices (Mirra et al., 2016). Consequently, the YCRs used these hybrid tools and theories of investigation to advocate on their own behalf. YPAR is “a radical re-visioning of what research is, who does it, and why it matters” (Mirra et al., 2016, p. 94).

Finally, I interrogated, alongside the YCRs, our role in creating a narrative about the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out. We were critical together of the decisions we made on what stories we shared and what stories were not present in our study. As Fine et al. (2000) assert, we have a responsibility to the youth in our study to present a multitude of nuanced stories, which add complexity to what it means to “drop out”, which are placed in a social and historical context, which counter prevailing deficit narratives, and which move others, ourselves included, to take action in changing the education system.

YPAR created interesting possibilities for the YCRs to explore and negotiate their own researcher roles and positionalities. For example, Rodríguez and Brown (2009) found in their YPAR study that some YCRs struggled with the expectation of shared control over their own learning because they rarely had been asked to make curriculum decisions in school. Additionally, collaborating with adults was a strange new experience for them because in their experience collaboration only happened between adults or between students, but not between adults and students. Mirra et al. (2016) found that as youth adopted the identity of researcher, it meant that they had to negotiate how others

viewed them and how they saw themselves as someone impacted by the educational inequities they were naming and someone who is in the position of producing knowledge.

Mirra et al. (2016) ask:

What are the implications of young people declaring themselves producers of knowledge—particularly young people of color living in marginalized communities? How do young people understand and manage the tension they face collecting data in their own communities and balancing their identities as both insiders and outsiders? What about the tension of trying to become insiders in spaces which try to keep them outside? (p. 94)

These were just some of the questions that the YCRs and I grappled with as we were changed and affected by this YPAR study. In Chapter 4, as I share the presentation and interpretation of our findings, I will highlight many of the transformative aspects of this study for both myself and the YCRs.

Chapter 4: Results

“I bring the perspective and voice from a person of color/minority born and raised in poverty. My experiences with teachers have been negative at times for reasons that are out of my control. I’ve been treated as if my brain can’t function as well as others or like I’m dumb because I wasn’t able to speak out in class. My voice matters because it’s been through hell and back with the education system and I don’t want others to have to go through school being told that they’re stupid.” (Bee Beltran, researcher notebook, March 28, 2017)

Youth voice is crucial in understanding what is and what is not working for young people in the education system. If we are serious about educating and serving young people—all young people—we need to take what they have to say and their ideas for change seriously. This research study offers an opportunity to hear from youth from historically marginalized communities who have left school and attend alternative schools, about what did and did not work for them in school in their own words and from their own perspectives. The rate at which young people are leaving school and being pushed out is alarming and persistent. In the United States, a staggering four thousand students drop out every school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2015). Approximately one-fifth of ninth graders do not finish high school on time and in many large urban areas the graduation rates are 50% or less (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014). Additionally, the pushout rate disproportionately impacts young people from historically marginalized communities, further marginalizing, disenfranchising, and silencing young people from these communities (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014; National Center for Education Statistics, 2017). The institutional racism that is built into the school system continues to inform who does well in school: White, middle and upper class young people.

Thus, young people of color, young people from poor and working class communities, and young people from other historically marginalized communities are leaving school and being pushed out by the system. These young people see the school system is not working and often face consequences, such as school pushout, when they speak out and refuse to comply. These are young people who see through the sterile curriculum that prepares them for standardized tests and emphasizes compliance over critical thought. They question learning from material that does not reflect their lived experiences. They refuse to endure a cruel school culture that breeds anxiety and is traumatizing and re-traumatizing them. They expect more from their teachers—caring relationships, support, accountability, multiple methods for teaching and learning, and compassion. They seek a definition of success beyond what they perceive as the lie the school system is offering. And yet, leaving school and being pushed out has real consequences in their lives. The stigma of being a “dropout” and self-blame for “failing” in school, can become internalized and some find that there are limited opportunities for work and means to support oneself without a high school diploma. They can feel stuck, depressed, and bored. Despite negative experiences in school, many young people demonstrate resiliency by returning to complete their education at an alternative school (America’s Promise Alliance, 2014). These young people have agency and they have voice, which is largely silenced and devalued when they are pushed out of the school system. They have an invaluable perspective about what is and is not working in mainstream and alternative education; a perspective that is not just meant to be heard and valued, but also to be seen as a call to action in solidarity with these young people to

make much needed change in the education system by dismantling it and rebuilding it together.

The purpose of my research was to explore the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out of school from their own perspectives and in their own voices. In particular, the study focused on the experience of youth from historically marginalized communities in terms of their perceptions of what prevented their success in mainstream schools, and, in contrast, what helped them to thrive in alternative schools. Ultimately, the study underscored the importance of youth voice and how their voices matter in changing the education system. In doing this research, I sought to explore the following research questions:

1. How do youth, ages 18-25, who were pushed out of mainstream schools before attending alternative schools, describe their educational experiences, specifically what helped and what prevented their “success” in mainstream and alternative schools?
 - a. How do these youth define “success” in school?
2. How do the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out of mainstream schools influence their perceptions of the educational system?
3. How do participating students in the role of youth co-researchers report their experiences of investigating their peers’ perceptions of the education system that did not serve them?

Researching *with* and not *on* youth was a fundamental part of my research methodology through the use of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). Hence, I

partnered with six youth co-researchers (YCRs), who were students at the alternative school where I teach to interview eight other young people, their peers, at the same school about their educational experiences in mainstream and alternative education. In this next section, I will show how our analysis and findings address the purpose of the study and the research questions.

Analysis of the Data

As described in Chapter 3, this study took place at Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS), a small school founded in 1995 in an urban community in the Northwestern United States. While the study started with seven YCRs (five women and two men), only six were involved in the data collection and analysis process (see Tables 2 and 3 in Chapter 3). There were a total of eight student participants (three women, four men, and one youth who identifies as gender fluid) were interviewed by the YCRs and myself (see Table 4 and 5 in Chapter 3). Each student participant was involved in at least one, but no more than four interviews, with each interview lasting just over 45 minutes on average (for a total of 560 minutes). The eight student participants were split into two groups, Group A and Group B, depending on their schedules at BAS. The YCRs and I completed 11 total interviews:

- Four interviews with student participants from Group A¹²
- Three interviews with student participants from Group B
- Two one-one-one interviews by student participant request

¹² We had to do two interviews using the Group Interview 3 protocol (See Appendix E) because students' schedules prevented us from interviewing all the Group A participants in one interview.

- One interview with four of the eight student participants about their experiences of the interview and research process
- One interview with five of the six YCRs who were involved in data collection and analysis about their experiences doing YPAR

Table 9 below shows a timeline of the data collection and analysis processes, including the students that participated in each and a summary of the activities and duration of these processes.

Table 9

Overview of Activities and Student Participation Over Time

Month and Year	Activities (Time duration, when relevant)	Youth Participation	Notes
March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with YCRs included community-building, exploration of school pushout and the education system, creating group identity and mission statement, finalizing research questions and research methods, and preparing for research presentation to BAS student body (about 20 total hours) 	Bee (YCR) Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Noah (YCR) Shania (YCR) Sk8 (YCR)	

April 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presentation to BAS student body • Meeting with YCRs included practicing interview techniques, finalizing interview protocol, debriefing interviews, discussing initial ideas and themes from interviews (about 20 total hours) • Interview 1 (Group A, first interview) • Interview 2 (Group A, second interview) • Interview 3 (Group B, first interview) 	Bee (YCR) Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Shania (YCR) Sk8 (YCR) Ame Friday Manny Martin Olivia Peter Ricky Xavier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Noah (YCR) graduated BAS and left to pursue work
May 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with YCRs included practicing interview techniques, finalizing interview protocol, debriefing interviews, discussing initial ideas and themes from interviews (about 24 total hours) • Member checking initial interpretations of findings and clarification with third interview • Interview 4 (solo interview with Ricky) • Interview 5 (Group B, second interview) • Interview 6 (some members of Group A, third interview) • Interview 7 (some members of Group A, third interview) 	Bee (YCR) Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Shania (YCR) Sk8 (YCR) Ame Friday Martin Olivia Ricky Xavier	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Peter graduated BAS and left to pursue work because of housing instability

June 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with YCRs included on-going data analysis, co-constructing counternarratives, themes, and recommendations, and preparation for presentations (about 20 total hours) • Member checking initial interpretations of findings and clarification as part of the third interviews • Interview 8 (Group B, third interview) • Interview 9 with student participants about interview process • Interview 10 (solo interview with Manny) • Interview 11 with YCRs about YPAR experience • Presentation to future teachers at a local university on June 15th • Presentation to BAS on June 21st • Applied to Northwest Teachers for Social Justice conference 	<p>Bee (YCR) Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Shania (YCR) Sk8 (YCR)</p> <p>Ame Friday Manny Olivia Ricky Xavier</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Martin graduated BAS and left to pursue work to support his family • Shania (YCR) decreased her participation to focus on her health
July 2017	Summer Break		

August 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with YCRs included data analysis of finalized interview transcriptions, discussions about YPAR process, co-constructing counternarratives, and refining our co-constructed themes (about 16 total hours) • Presented to future teachers about YPAR at a local university on August 28th • Applied to Teaching with Purpose conference 	Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Sk8 (YCR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bee (YCR) graduated and left to prioritize work, family, and her health • Friday graduated BAS and left to pursue work • Manny graduated BAS and left to prioritize work and family • Olivia left BAS to prioritize her health and family • Xavier left BAS to work and prioritize family
September 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with YCRs included data analysis of finalized interview transcriptions and researcher notebooks, co-constructing counternarratives, refining our co-constructed themes, and preparing for October presentations (about 16 total hours) • Conversation with Jeff Duncan-Andrade on September 27th 	Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Sk8 (YCR)	

October 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with YCRs included synthesizing the findings and co-constructed themes, co-constructing counternarratives, creating a visual representation of the problems in the education system, and finalizing our presentations (about 16 total hours) • Attended and presented at the Teaching with Purpose Conference in Portland on October 13th and 14th • Attended and presented at the Northwest Teachers for Social Justice Conference in Seattle on October 21st 	Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR) Maria (YCR) Sk8 (YCR)	
November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No meetings with YCRs while I began compiling the counternarratives 		
December 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meetings with YCRs included creating brief descriptions of student participants and YCRs, co-constructing the counternarratives, discussing their experience doing YPAR (3.5 hours) 	Irisa (YCR) Lulis (YCR)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maria (YCR) moved out of the state • Sk8 (YCR) decreased participation to focus on work, providing for his family, and completing his last GED test

January 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Member checking counternarratives with student participants • Meeting with YCRs for member checking counternarratives and sections of the dissertation and discussing their experiences presenting at conferences (3.5 hours) 	Lulis (YCR) Irisa (YCR) Ame Friday Ricky Olivia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Olivia and Friday came into BAS on their own time to review their counternarratives • Ame and Ricky continued to attend BAS
February 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting with YCRs for member checking counternarratives and sections of the dissertation with YCRs (3.5 hours) 	Lulis (YCR) Irisa (YCR)	

As the YCRs and I listened to the student participants speak about their educational experiences and share the disturbing injustices they have faced in school, we began to co-construct counternarratives to push back on the dominant narrative about what it means to be a dropout. The process of co-constructing these counternarratives was a large part of our data analysis process. According to Solórzano and Yosso (2009), counternarratives center on the knowledge, experience, and stories of the oppressed, which are often hidden and silenced. Using their insider knowledge as young people who have been pushed out of school, the YCRs made determinations about what was significant in the interviews, in order to co-create these counternarratives. The goal of the data analysis process was to authentically involve and center the perspectives of youth who have been most directly impacted by the issue of school pushout (Irizarry & Brown, 2014; Pizarro, 1999). The YCRs and I met for about four hours each week from April to

June 2017 (see Appendix A) to discuss what was coming up for us as significant in the interviews, why we see it as a significant or emerging theme, and how our own educational experiences fit with what we heard from youth participants. We discussed themes that were both similar across interviews and themes that were unique to individual participants in the interviews. Following Freire's (1970) model of problem-posing education, the YCRs and I identified "generative" themes in our interview data and then synthesized those findings and counternarratives into recommendations for changes to the education system. With six out of the eight of the student participants, we were able to engage in member checking by returning to them in the third interview to gain more clarity and to vet our own interpretations of what they said in previous interviews. At this time, we also were able to get feedback on our preliminary themes and findings. With this feedback and new data, we would return to the iterative process of asking, reflecting, discussing, and further refining our recommendations for action.

However, for YPAR it is not enough to ensure that we had meaningfully involved and accurately represented the voices of youth who have been pushed out of school, we also needed to take action in solidarity with these voices (Mirra et al., 2016; Pizarro, 1999). By positioning themselves as agents of change, the YCRs and myself took action based on our findings by sharing our recommendations and demands for changing the education system at six presentations from June 2017 to October 2017. We sought to transform the knowledge and practices of future and current teachers by sharing what we had learned about experiences of youth who have left school, in order to improve the educational experiences of current and future youth (Rodríguez & Brown, 2009). The

YCRs and I took our co-constructed themes as findings to create two presentations in June 2017: (1) to a group of graduating teacher candidates at a local university and (2) to staff and students at Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS)¹³. From August to October, four of the YCRs and I continued to refine our themes and recommendations through further discussion and analysis of the significant ideas in the interviews (see Table 9). We presented these findings at two conferences in October 2017—the Teaching with Purpose Conference in Portland, OR and the Northwest Teachers for Social Justice Conference in Seattle, WA. At this same time, we also presented to a group of pre-service teachers at a local university about our YPAR research methods. In each of the presentations, the focus was:

1. To share the educational experiences of youth from our research who have been pushed out as counternarratives to the dominant dropout narrative;
2. To represent our co-constructed themes with the counternarratives (what the student participants said in the interviews); and
3. To recommend changes to the education system, in particular what teachers can do to improve the educational experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities.

The co-constructed themes address the first and second research questions and will be described in detail later in this chapter as part of the presentation and interpretation of findings.

¹³ The pseudonym for the alternative school where YCRs and students participants attend and where I teach.

Additionally, the data analysis process involved my own reflections from the perspective as the adult researcher in the YPAR process and as a teacher myself. In addition to the themes that the YCRs and I co-constructed, I have also included two themes that come from my own observations, reflections, connections, and interpretations as an outsider and my particular lens as a White, middle class woman, who has been successful in mainstream academia. My interpretations were certainly influenced by what I heard from the co-researchers and what they found significant based on their insider perspective; but it indeed needs an emphasis that these themes from me should be viewed differently since they are largely filtered through my outsider lens. The goal of this research study was to privilege the insider perspective of the YCRs, center on their worldview, and take action in solidarity with them through the use of YPAR as a decolonizing research methodology (Smith, 2012). Certainly, the themes co-constructed with the YCRs should be given greater legitimacy and more weight than these themes from my own perspective. In the presentation and interpretation of findings section later in this chapter, I will refer to these two themes as “themes from the outsider perspective.”

Following our presentations, I compiled counternarratives from the perspectives and in the words of each of the eight student participants from across the interviews (see Table 4 and Table 5 in Chapter 3 for information about participant demographics and characteristics). These counternarratives are a crucial part of how the research analysis speaks to the first and second research questions and addresses the purpose of the study. These counternarratives push back on the dominant dropout narratives that oppress the marginalized voices of young people who have left school and been pushed out (Fine,

1994; Solórzano & Yosso, 2009). I reordered and put together what the student participants said across the group interviews, so as to create a cohesive and coherent counternarrative of each student participant's educational experience and perspective on the education system in their words (Pérez Huber, 2009). These counternarratives show that while there are many important similarities in the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out, their experiences are not monolithic. It is my responsibility as a researcher to present a multitude of nuanced counternarratives, to add complexity to what it means to leave school, without reproducing stereotypes or reducing students' stories into clichés that are superficial, harmful, and/or “othering” at worst (Fine, 1994; Fine et al., 2000). What better way to move others, ourselves included, to take action in changing the education system than with the words from the student participants themselves? Later in this chapter, when I present the counternarratives in the presentation and interpretation of findings section, I will go into more detail about the process of compiling the counternarratives.

Finally, to address the third and final research question, I will present key findings on how the YCRs described their experiences doing YPAR. Their experience as YCRs was documented throughout the research study in the reflections in their researcher notebooks and in the field notes in my own researcher notebook. As I have already described, when the YCRs and I met between April 2017 and February 2018 (about 58 times, ranging from one to four hours, for a total of 122 hours), we would engage in discussions around data analysis. At these meetings, we would also discuss the research process itself, their journey of seeing themselves as researchers, and how the research and

the experience of being YCRs affected their identities. Additionally, the eleventh and final group interview in June 2017 was one that I did with five of the YCRs to discuss their overall experience of the research study. This interview was done before we presented, but I also collected statements from a couple of the YCRs about their experience presenting and speaking their “truth” to “power”. The key findings on how the YCRs described their experiences doing YPAR are detailed later in this chapter in the presentation and interpretation of findings section. Table 10 below shows how each of the research questions are addressed by the data analysis as well as the key data collection instruments that were used to address the questions.

Table 10

Research Questions and Data Analysis Methods Crosswalk

Research Questions	Data Analysis Methods	Data Collection Instruments
1. How do youth, ages 18-25, who were pushed out of mainstream schools before attending alternative schools, describe their educational experiences, specifically what helped and what prevented their “success” in mainstream and alternative schools? a. How do these youth define “success” in school?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Iterative and on-going discussions with the YCRs about significant themes from their insider perspective • Foregrounding the knowledge, experiences, and interpretations of the YCRs and student participants based on their lived experiences as youth who have been pushed out of school • Alongside YCRs, synthesizing findings into themes and recommendations for changing the education system • Taking action in solidarity with youth who have been pushed out to present findings and recommendations to 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Group and one-to-one interviews with the student participants • YCRs’ researcher notebooks • Field notes • Presentations (agendas, outlines, and media) • Conversations with YCRs following presentations
2. How do the educational experiences of youth who have been pushed out of mainstream schools influence their perceptions of the educational system?		

	teachers and other stakeholders <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compiling counternarratives in student participants' own words from the interviews • Outsider, adult researcher reflection and interpretation of interviews 	
3. How do participating students in the role of youth co-researchers report their experiences of investigating their peers' perceptions of the education system that did not serve them?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • On-going conversations with YCRs about their experiences doing YPAR • Discussions with YCRs following presentations • Adult researcher reflection and interpretation of discussions with YCRs about their experience as researchers 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YCRs' researcher notebooks • Field notes • Group interview with five YCRs • Conversations with YCRs following presentations

Researcher Positionality

As I immersed myself in the data collection and analysis process, my reflection on how this research was affecting and changing me became stronger and more overt. One shift I made was from intellectually approaching research to approaching it from the heart. Before beginning this research project, I intellectually understood that the young people attending BAS had experienced traumatic and toxic school environments, but I did not understand it with my heart. The YCRs, having experienced school pushout themselves, already understood the painful experiences the student participants had gone through in school on a deeply empathetic and emotional level. As a young, White, middle-class woman who has been successful in mainstream education, I do not pretend to understand what the student participants and YCRs endured in their previous schools. And yet, I was invited into the empathetic space co-created between the YCRs and

student participants in these interviews to *feel* alongside these young people and not just intellectualize and analyze their stories as data.

I felt sad, angry, depressed, disturbed, and overwhelmed by the stories of the YCRs and student participants. Feeling these emotions allowed me to get closer to the research and my approaches shifted to making decisions from the heart and out of care for the people involved. For example, I became frustrated with the logistics of scheduling the third interviews for each group because of changes in students' schedules at BAS. Instead of being attached to the research plan, I prioritized solutions that would be most respectful to the YCRs and student participants to honor their commitment to the study and their busy and sometimes chaotic lives. As a researcher and a person, I learned that emotional distance was not an asset to this research project. By approaching and learning from the heart, it made the research more respectful and humanizing to those involved and had a greater impact on me as a person.

The second shift that I made as a researcher and person, was gaining a deeper understanding of trust in a student-teacher relationship. I will never forget the day, a little less than two months into the study, when Lulis told me directly that she did not trust me. The YCRs and I were signing the Confidentiality Contract (see Appendix H), which asked them to let me know before they decided to exit the research study. Lulis said that she did not think she could do that. If she left the study, she would not let me know. When I asked her why, she said it was because she did not trust me. I was very surprised because I prided myself on building trusting relationships with my students and especially with the YCRs in this case. And yet, I was struck by the fact that Lulis had

been so open, honest, and vulnerable to share with me that she did not trust me. It felt like by sharing this with me, she was leaving the door open even a crack for that trust to be built. She had trusted me with information that was difficult for her to share and she had decided to be honest rather than simply sign a piece of paper with directions she was not going to follow. I realized that it was a lot to ask youth at BAS to trust me, as a teacher, since so many teachers before me had dismissed, disregarded, and made false promises to these students. It became clear to me how careful and vigilant I needed to be to not reproduce what other teachers had done in these students' pasts. I could not take for granted the YCRs' and student participants' honesty, commitment to the research project, and openness to sharing their stories.

What helped to build this trust over time? Showing care for the YCRs' consistently; putting care for them over care for the research project itself; modeling humility and apologizing when I made a mistake; and following through with the promises I made. We hugged each other in greeting and goodbye and told each other in words and actions that we cared. We disrupted normalized boundaries that center Whiteness and values, such as, emotional distance in professional spaces. As a result, we co-constructed trusting and caring relationships. The work of this research and the teaching profession is about people, but people and their humanity often get lost in the name of doing the work. The YCRs taught me how to build even stronger trusting relationships with young people and it meant approaching these relationships with vulnerability and an even deeper sense of heart, care, and humility. In the next section, I

will further detail the presentation and interpretation of findings, which were born out of the close, caring, trusting, and humble approach the YCRs helped to teach me.

Presentation of Results and Interpretation of Findings

This section is divided into four parts to represent the four areas of data analysis described in the previous section: (1) counternarratives, (2) themes co-constructed with the YCRs—the insider perspectives, (3) themes from the outsider perspective, and (4) YCRs’ experiences of doing YPAR. In the first part, I will share eight counternarratives from the student participants, which illustrate what does and does not work about mainstream and alternative education in their own words, as well as their perceptions of the education system. The second part, will detail the four themes the YCRs and I co-constructed from our analysis and our interpretation of those themes. The four themes are: “I felt invisible to the teachers,” “teaching is a sacred act,” “regular high school is like drowning, it’s cruel,” and “dropping out was [actually] a success.” The titles of three of these themes come directly from what student participants said in the interviews and “teaching is a sacred act” is from our conversation with Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade, which will be discussed later in this chapter. In the third part, I will share my interpretation of two additional themes from my own, or the perspective as the outsider, adult researcher. Those two themes are: resiliency and leaving school is traumatic. The fourth and final part, will provide key findings and interpretations of how the YCRs described their experiences of being involved in YPAR. Table 11 below provides an overview of the presentation and interpretation of findings section.

Table 11

Overview of the Presentation and Interpretation of Findings

Counternarratives As Evidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Ame: “Perseverance...I kept trying different alternatives” • Friday: “You talk to us like human beings” • Manny: “We’re all here to learn something from each other” • Martin: “Society calls it dropout, but I just feel like I was saved” • Olivia: “Me and school have a love and hate relationship” • Peter: “They teach you to listen and conform” • Ricky: “I ghosted out...I felt invisible to the teachers” • Xavier: “Leaving kids alone when they struggle is part of the system and letting kids fail is part of what they do”
Co-Constructed Themes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “I felt invisible to the teachers” • “Teaching is a sacred act” • “Regular high school is like drowning, it’s cruel” • “Dropping out was [actually] a success”
Themes from the Outsider Perspective	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leaving school is traumatic • Resiliency
YCRs’ Experiences Doing YPAR	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Key findings and interpretations about being involved in YPAR from the YCRs’ own perspectives

Counternarratives As Evidence

Using Solórzano & Yosso's (2009) critical race theory methodological framework, I compiled counternarratives to represent each student participant's story about their educational experiences in mainstream and alternative education. The intention of these counternarratives is to foreground the perspectives and lived experiences of the student participants and to let their words stand on their own before sharing the thematic interpretation of what was said from the YCRs and myself. Hence, the words in the counternarratives are directly from what each student participant said across the interviews, but they have been edited for readability, flow, and to create a coherent story. This method of combining multiple data sources to tell the lived experiences of people from marginalized communities is referred to as a *composite counter-storytelling* (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Hubain, Allen, Harris, & Linder, 2016; Patton & Catching, 2009). Typically, composite counter-storytelling refers to compiling multiple participants' stories and lived experiences together into one cohesive narrative and creating a fictionalized, composite character as a way to further protect the identities of the participants when they may be more vulnerable or easily identifiable (Cook & Dixson, 2013; Patton & Catching, 2009). In the case of the counternarratives I compiled for this research study, I have not put multiple student participants' stories into one narrative. Instead, the composition of each student participant's narrative comes from what they said across the multiple interviews. As with composite counter-storytelling, these compiled counternarratives force, "us to listen and hopefully empathize with the depth of emotion with the narratives...to reorient the reader to the experiences of people

who are often invisible, yet demonized in mainstream society” (Cook & Dixon, 2013, p. 1253). One of the purposes of the counternarratives is to challenge the status quo and the dominant narrative’s perspective of what it means to be a dropout. In fact, the in-depth approach of representing data through these counternarratives challenges the traditional ways in which research presents data, with the hope of reaching readers and contributing to knowledge construction in ways that might not otherwise happen (Hubain et al., 2016).

As I compiled these counternarratives from what the student participants said in the interviews, as stated earlier, I edited and re-organized what they said to create a story with a coherent, readable flow that stayed true to the cadence and personality of each of the student participants. While the YCRs consented to be named, the student participants with the exception of one, chose to protect their identities with pseudonyms. When possible, the student participants chose the pseudonyms themselves.

Framing the counternarratives. Here are several examples of the kind of edits I made in compiling the counternarratives. In general, I reordered direct quotes from the student participants in the interviews to tell a clear story. Hence, the order that the student participants’ words appear in the counternarrative is not necessarily in the order in which they told it to us across the interviews. Punctuation was also added to help with readability. At times, I added words for clarity, to provide context, or to connect ideas in the counternarratives. In most of these cases I put the words that I added in brackets. Here are a couple of examples of how I added words. For example, Peter’s statement, “As a matter of fact that changed once I got here” became “As a matter of fact that [definition of success] changed once I got here [to BAS]” to provide clarity and context. To connect

Xavier's ideas about standardized testing to his statement, "I understand the point of it," I changed it to "I understand the point of it [standardized testing]." There were also times when I cut out words to omit repetition, false starts, and other phrasing that limited readability, for example the words "like" and "you know." As an example, I changed Xavier's statement, "For me it was probably, if I could probably speak the language better and then I had like, you know, the tests was probably easier and whatnot" to "For me, if I could probably speak the language better, the tests was probably easier and whatnot." Other times, I made small changes to the order of words or phrases within a sentence. For example, what Martin said, "The people just think they're all that and they'll fuck you up like bump into me or like, 'I'm cooler than you cuz I have money'" became "The people just think they're all that like, 'I'm cooler than you cuz I have money.' They'll fuck you up like bump into me." These changes were usually made in consultation with the YCRs or through member checking with the student participant. I also did not include any specific school or teachers' names, which meant in some cases I added a phrase to describe the school in brackets instead of using its name. For example, Friday says, "In seventh grade, I transferred over to [an alternative school]." An "and" or "then" were sometimes added in order to connect ideas and stories from the same student participant across different interviews. Finally, there were parts of the interviews that were omitted because they were outside the scope of the research questions and purpose of the research study or because the YCRs and I felt they would make it too easy to identify the student participant.

The decisions about what stories and information from the interview to include in these counternarratives came from the discussions with the YCRs and member checking when possible with the student participants. Pizarro's (1999) social justice research methodology and Smith's (2012) decolonizing research methodology frameworks guided the collaboration with student participants and YCRs to create these counternarratives. The final presentation of these counternarratives is informed by the discussions the YCRs and I had about what was most significant to them in the interviews throughout the data collection and analysis process. In the third round of interviews, the YCRs and I asked specific questions to the student participants to clarify what they had said and to get feedback from them about our initial interpretations about what was said. This helped prevent us from misrepresenting their stories and ideas in the counternarratives. Since many of the student participants we interviewed have since graduated or left BAS, I was not able to have every student participant read the counternarratives I compiled. Four out of the eight student participants were able to read over their counternarratives and make changes to ensure that: (1) their story was accurately represented, (2) the main ideas and perspectives they wanted expressed were clear, and (3) everything in the counternarrative was something that they wanted shared. Friday decided not to change anything in her counternarrative. She asserted, "I stand by what I said!" (Friday, personal communication, January 24, 2017). In the cases where the student participant could not read their counternarrative, two of the YCRs read each of the compiled narratives to check that I had as authentically as possible captured the student participants' perspective and educational experience (Pérez Huber, 2009). The two YCRs and I met to read the

counternarratives out loud to each other as a strategy to hear whether the counternarrative did justice to the student participant's story. We discussed whether the counternarrative captured what they heard the students say, whether any part of the counternarrative felt out of place or odd like a misrepresentation, and whether there was anything that they thought from the student participant's perspective that they would not want included.

The process of member checking with the YCRs and the student participants made an important impact on the counternarratives. One student participant asked to bold a phrase in their counternarrative that was important for them to be emphasized. Another student participant changed the order of the paragraphs in their counternarrative to make sure that stories that happened around the same time in their life were clustered together. The YCRs also changed the order of how the stories were presented in another student participant's counternarrative, in order to better highlight one theme that they had heard repeatedly in several of the interviews and they felt needed to be better emphasized. The YCRs also caught an error in my original transcription of an interview where I had misheard a phrase that they were familiar with and changed it in the counternarrative. In our discussions, the YCRs remembered key details that they heard in the interviews from each of the student participants and made sure that those details were in the counternarratives. These efforts to member check were important for these young people to have power over the message and meaning of their stories and the ultimate form of these counternarratives. However, I am aware of the tension that as a White, middle class, privileged woman, I made decisions about what is included in the student participants'

counternarratives, albeit with guidance from the YCRs and student participants. I will address this tension further in the limitations section later in this chapter.

Olivia, one of student participants, said as a caution against judgment, “It's not your guys' story, you guys didn't live in it. I'm not you...it's like you're trying to speak your opinion on a road you never walked before.” As you read these counternarratives, pay attention to how they capture the underlying frustrations, feelings, and hopes of these young people whose lived experiences may be very different from your own. Be aware of the ways in which these richer, more complex counternarratives challenge the dominant dropout narrative that may be feeding people's judgments about what it means to leave school and attend an alternative school.

Ame: “Perseverance...I kept trying different alternatives.” I like the school's [BAS's] environment. Like when I first came here, I got really anxious being around people and I have really bad social anxiety. So coming here was like, “Oh it's going to be just like a normal school, just keep to myself.” When I first came here so many people were approaching me. It kind of freaked me out and I got really uncomfortable, but it's a really nice setting. I get up in the morning and I'm excited to come to school. Like before I hated getting up in the morning. Like I would tell my mom every day, I'm like “Can I please stay home?” And she's like “Yeah, you can stay home today.” Cuz like I would skip so much classes and school because I was like I don't even want to go to school today. But like every morning [now], I get up and I'm excited to go to school. I've never been that way ever.

[BAS teachers] try to make accommodations for you in class. We were doing practice GED tests and I was like, “Can I maybe skip that and work on stuff that I need for phase requirements because I could take the practice test next phase?” And so that’s what [the teacher] did. She’s like, “Yeah you can go ahead and get this done and get work done that you need to get done.” Most teachers would be [like], “No, you have to get this done even if it has nothing to do with what you’re doing.” At BAS, teachers will get on me, like, “You can’t be doing this right now!” Today [in class] I spaced out because I was just really tired and [the teacher] was like, “Hey I noticed you kind of stopped working.” And I’m like, “Oh, I did.” She’s one of my favorite teachers. She’s really cool. She stayed five minutes after during lunch to help me finish my assessment, which I passed. We’ve been doing argumentative essays and [another teacher], he’s been helping me find articles and stuff and he wants me to present it and I’m like, “Okay, well could we practice it? Because I get anxiety speaking in front of people.” And he’s like, “Yeah, we can do that as many times as you need to.”

I don’t feel rushed [at BAS]. Feeling rushed is one thing for me. Because for me at normal schools, you feel rushed. Like eighth grade through sophomore year— eighth grade they just threw it at you. And then freshman year, I passed Algebra 1 and flunked Algebra 2 and then I had to take it again sophomore year. And I would come into school an hour before school started to practice with the teacher and I still failed. Because they would explain it one way, not multiple ways.

I left school because of major bullying. I remember freshman year, I got shoved into a locker and I was in there for about 15 minutes. The kids who put me in there, broke

the outside of the locker, so they had to take the locker [door] off to get me out. When I first started going my freshman year, they had slap ass Fridays. A football senior came up and touched my butt. I told people all the time. I'm like, "Excuse me, I'm being sexually harassed by football players on the football team." [The teachers would say] "You're lying." I would tell them straight up the minute I started walking past them, "You touch me, I'll drop kick you in the throat." I didn't tolerate that.

My mom had issues with it. She spent about two months dealing with the schools about the [bullying] issues and they didn't do anything about it. And so there were days where she would come to class with me cuz she wasn't working and she would sit there, like "If you bully my daughter, I'll kick your ass." Because these were kids who were like grown ass like they were twice my size and I'm like this really small kid getting picked on by people twice my size. People would stay away from me when my mom went to school with me. But the days she didn't come, I'd get in trouble. My mom wasn't having it and the teachers were seeing it [i.e., the bullying]. I hated every single one of my teachers because of that. I didn't like any of them. I even called one of my teachers a bitch because I'm like you're noticing this shit and not doing anything about it.

Schools need better teaching. Mainly the teachers would be really docile and not enthusiastic. In normal schools it's like they don't really give a shit. It's like a lot of the time they just put the paperwork on the main screen and then you copy it. [One of my favorite teachers], he would get on me. He actually stood up for me when I was getting bullied. His math class is my favorite because he'd sit with me during lunch. And we'd eat together and we'd work on math, so I could get it done. He would make me give him my

phone at the beginning of class. If he knew you were a student that would mess around on your phone. If you didn't, then you didn't have to. If I was in a bad mood, [the teacher] would realize it and rather than working with other students, he'd work with me because he knew that I was a student like if I'm in a bad mood, then something's going on and I need more help.

I know for me sophomore year, I was in my English class and I had straight A's throughout my whole year. I got to English class and the teacher stopped teaching because students wouldn't shut the fuck up. And so I did my work cuz I knew what I was supposed to do, I did it, I handed it to her, I walked out of class. She called the security and said I couldn't leave. "No, you ain't getting in my way. My mom's here she knows why I'm leaving." And they're like, "But you can't leave" and one of them grabbed me and I punched him in the chest and I said, "Nah, I'm leaving" and I walked out. And the school said, "No, you just can't be leaving class." I'm like, "This teacher stopped teaching. I ain't going to waste my time." Nah, I ain't dealing with that and then like three months later, I stopped going. I was like no I'm done with this shit. You guys are wasting my time. And I don't like my time being wasted.

Elementary school and middle school, like your grades don't really matter, so you don't really give a shit, but when you get to high school your grades do matter, so people who didn't give a shit about their grades beforehand, they go downhill once they hit high school. They test you unfairly like no other. Science has proven that students nowadays have the same stress and anxiety levels for testing as insane asylums did in the 1950s. Because our testing is so strict. So it's, it is actually a lot harder as opposed to when our

parents were kids. So we struggle more. I used to get told that all the time like in school—I was the top student in all my classes—like if I didn't have my work, they're like, "Why don't you have your work?" and I'm like, "Cuz I was at dance or cuz I was helping my family." And they're like, "You're being lazy, you're giving excuses." And I'm like, "Those aren't excuses, I'm doing something." I feel like if I wasn't getting my work done on time, then I felt like I was being lazy because I wasn't doing it when they wanted. And then my mom noticed that I was getting stressed out and she was like, "You know what? Just drop out of high school right now and we'll find a different alternative for you cuz it's not working." And that's what I did.

I think leaving school was helpful for me because I was able to take the year and a half off that I did to find who I am as a person and take my time that I needed. I figured out what I wanted to do with my life, what I wanted from life, how I wanted to achieve that goal that I set for myself, personal and educational. Dropout for me it says you're a failure or someone who's not intelligent. Well, some people think getting your GED means you're a failure. It's funny cuz it doesn't even matter anyways what you have, GED or diploma, because they look if you've gone to college. Or if you've been in a job. For me, leaving school, I feel like it's both a failure, but also a success. So, I failed even though I was succeeding in school, I failed because I had personal issues going on. And I gave up on getting a high school diploma. But, I'm also succeeding because I'm also finishing getting high school completion with a GED. Perseverance might be [the term] I use cuz even though I dropped out sophomore year, I kept trying different alternatives.

Friday: “You talk to us like human beings.” I have never gone to a mainstream high school cuz after getting the feedback from other kids at the one public middle school I went to, it was like high school just going to be like sixth grade all over again, but worse. So, I was just like, “No. No, thank you.” [The school that] was probably as close to a mainstream high school as I’ll ever get, I only went there for not even half a year. I tried staying just cuz the non-academic classes were so amazing. They had a laser printer and a 3D printer. And I was just like, “What?!” And they had a psychology class that was part of our history class and social studies class. And the teachers were actually nice to me, but all the students would make jokes about me and just really bully me. So, then I stopped and came here [to BAS].

[At BAS] you guys are really flexible. If we need a five-minute break, we’ll just come up and ask you. And the majority of the teachers will say, “Okay, yeah.” You guys are like—you guys care about us, but you’re not always in our business. No one is holier than thou and you talk to us like human beings. My old school and my old, old school, they’d like always be in your business. If you looked sad or you’d be angry, they’d be taking you out in the hall and they wouldn’t let you leave without talking to them. You’d have to tell them why. It was horrible. They always want to say that they have a community and like a family vibe there, where it’s like you can talk to them, but the thing I like about here [at BAS] where it’s like if you’re having a bad day, you don’t have to talk to them. You give us space. You let us do a little bit less work and like get back there. Meanwhile at [my previous school] they would push you until you told them. And you wouldn’t be able to leave the hallway or the counselor’s office. Cuz they’d take you

to the counselor's office and be like, "So are you going to tell us what's wrong now?" If you stayed there for more than a year because after a year they totally could understand what you looked like when you're there and when you're not, when you're mad. Shit like that. But it took them a whole year. You have to actually really get to know them [the students]. I just wish the dress code wasn't as strict [at BAS]. I have to worry about what I'm going to wear, instead of just throwing something on.

[I was] ghosting it in school. I literally didn't turn in any work, I just sat there and I'd skip class. No one at that school talked to me, so I didn't talk to anyone. Even with the teachers, a lot of them really blatantly didn't care about the class. If you didn't ask questions and weren't down their throats about it, it's like I'm not that kind of person. I just didn't try because [of] the teachers. Either it was like you understood what they were talking about or you didn't and they didn't care about you. So, it's like people who sat in the front, they cared about. But anybody else they just didn't really care about.

In seventh grade, I transferred over to [an alternative school]. And I was there off and on for two years. Cuz then I switched back to another school, which was a public school for friends cuz I was super bored and didn't really have anyone to talk to there. And then I switched back and I went there [to the alternative school] until ninth grade. So, like two more years. And then I transferred to [a charter high school that was] more of a college prep school, so I was just like, "Whaaat?!" Cuz like I'd just come from a school where the only class we got homework in was our history class and that was like once a month. They gave you just enough class work that it's like they knew you got it. I was like, "This is my vibe. I can actually get an A in my classes." And then I went to a

college prep school and I'm like, "Ahhh!" Cuz more than half of the teachers in the classes I had really didn't give a crap about you unless you were like pushing their buttons for work. And you got homework in every single class and it was absolutely absurd like an absurd amount. I was just like, "Nope." And so I would usually skip out at lunch and go to the park and chill 'til school got out and I'd go home and my mom wouldn't notice until she'd get a call from the school. And then they had an online program there and I did that for three or four months and then I stopped doing it cuz I was like, "I'm just going into class and like going on Tumblr. I'm not doing any of the work." That was just to please my mom and like have her think I was going to school and doing stuff. They didn't kick me out, I had to actually just stop going. Cuz my mom wouldn't let me transfer again cuz I've transferred a lot. And I gave it a couple months and I was just like, "Okay, this is seriously not okay." And then, I wasn't in school for like a year. Or something like that. And then I came here [BAS].

I lost a lot of credit. I was getting math high school credits in seventh and eighth grade and none of those transferred over and neither did any of the credits gotten the whole year of ninth grade. I had gotten like all A's and I was like, "Okay, I can leave this school and have a nice little transcript for my first year." And they didn't send any of my credits. And in the one class I actually participated in and got like a half credit in at [the charter school] was my Spanish class cuz that was the first time I actually had a language class. So, I was just like, "Heck, yeah!" And they didn't transfer that. But, I was still like, "Come on. That was the one class I actually did work in." If they mess with your credits or they don't give you an elective class that's your break class. That's where you're

supposed to chill and do something that you actually like to. Have that class hour of getting away from actual class work to refresh and start up again like a restart.

I wasn't allowed to go back to my middle school because I was supposed to go to DESC¹⁴. It was patronizing. We'd have to fill out worksheets at the end of it [about how] drugs are bad...[and how the] frontal cortex of your brain and how it's not fully developed until your mid-twenties. That's why I just skipped out on that school and went to [the alternative school], but then I still had to go to DESC because my mom told me that she was still getting notices that we needed to go.

[When I left school] I kind of like just like sat in my room. Would like smoke and listen to music, sleep when I could. It was really good for the first few months. It was nice because I was immensely stressed [earlier]. And then I just got so bored that nothing was making me happy. I like didn't even want to leave my house like go and hang out with [friends] or something. I didn't want to do anything. And I like stopped eating for a while. I was just smoking cigarettes in my room and I was just like I want to die. Like I'm just so bored.

When I think of dropout, I think of you just stop going to school in general. Like you just don't go back whether it's to an alternative program or not. With the last two places I went that was definitely a success. I didn't have a plan afterwards so that was not successful. But leaving was definitely a great thing. Cuz you're not in the right space in your head or just around you and you're clearly not going to get as far as you want to or

¹⁴ Bee, one of the co-researchers was familiar with DESC, she explained in one of the interviews how it was, "a delayed expulsion program based toward drug problems and stuff. It's just you had to go through a week [or more] of that program in order to get back into school. Or else you couldn't go back to a Portland Public School."

you could. So you're just taking a break and if it's too long of a break, you still go back and finish off what you want to do. And it's in a space and place where you feel 100% comfortable or at least 75% and clearly it will be better and you'll do better.

Manny: **"We're all here to learn something from each other."** [In school] no one wants to speak up and be heard because if they're wrong they feel everyone is going to judge them and they don't want to have the opportunity for judgment. And me I was always outspoken, so I was always answering questions even if I didn't know the answers. And the teacher was like, okay, here's a student that's going to interact with me as I'm teaching and make my job more entertaining and better so he's the only one speaking up to be focused on. And I feel like at BAS, they come to you, "Hey, what do you need to focus on, what is not working for you right now?" At a regular high school, a teacher is never going to do that. A closed mouth is never going to get fed at a regular high school. You have to ask. They're sitting there grading papers waiting for you to come ask, "Hey, I don't know this." But there's so many people and sometimes the teacher won't call on you because there's so many people and not enough time that you start to fall back and not reach out for help, but honestly he [the teacher] doesn't have time at that moment and now he does but you're afraid to ask. Everybody's going up there. And he's helping other people or he's just sitting there and everybody's doing the work and you don't want to feel stupid.

It leads to not wanting to go to class cuz you're like, "I'm already failing so why be in class?" And then it's like why even be in school if I'm not going to class. Oh shit. Now I'm behind. And you get in trouble for not being in school and you're forced to stay

in school. Then you don't know what the hell is going on in class and you try to focus then you just get frustrated and it goes down hill. Fights, angry, storming out. And some of the reasons you don't even know why you're mad or you don't feel like yourself. Regular high school is like drowning, it's like beating almost. It's cruel.

I had a freaking coding class. And everyone's getting the hang of it and I'm not seeming to be able to remember anything and just not retaining. And these people are building websites and all these cool games and shit. And I'm not just getting any steps further. Asking for help, not understanding so I just would be like, "Man." And [the teacher] would be like, "Why are you not getting it?" And he would be frustrated that I'm not getting it. He could only teach it one way. So then he's getting frustrated and it frustrated me. Okay, we're both frustrated so, I'm just going to leave. I find myself leaving and skipping class and being like, "Oh shit." Now since I've left class, I might as well go do something and leave school and come back at lunch. And I just end up skipping more classes and walking down the hallway, getting into trouble. Other students follow you cuz you left. I never skipped all day. I enjoyed being in class. I would skip and then come back. There were so many students. It was so big. Passing time was barely enough to get into class. And then, I wasn't doing well. I had all F's at the end of the semester and I was like, "Damn, I have to go to summer school. I'm not trying to do all that." And I need to work too. I don't have time to do that. And that was just my choice.

I found myself in a lot of predicaments in classes or where I would have too much fun in a class just because I was trying to keep myself focused. For me, being focused I have to entertain myself. I still get work done. And I guess a lot of teachers expect just

because a person's goofing off they're not done and they're not doing what they're supposed to do or not understanding or paying attention. I can multi-task for me it seems like. And I still retain a lot of the information even though I might seem like I'm not straightly focused. I find myself getting kicked out a lot of times just for being out-going.

I found that no one was really connected to the teachers. We only knew names. Had a conversation for the moment. And as soon as you're out of that class, man they were just, you're done now, you know. You don't go to my class anymore. Some kids never knew the teachers or never were known by the teachers and it was almost like when they asked a question or when they weren't there, "Oh this student's not here. I didn't even know we had this student." I just found the teachers being unable to connect with all the students.

I would find like you'd get an assignment and the teacher would go sit at their desk. Assignment, study, book, fill out this paper. Shabam. And they're not going in between, "Oh, how are you guys feeling, anybody need help?" Just sitting at their desk, either on their phone or it looks like they're just grading papers. And then people just start moving up and throwing papers across the room, "I'm not understanding this" and "He's not even paying attention to me." If the teacher's not involved, the students aren't going to be involved.

I would be in classes where the teacher felt like they were more privileged than the students. And being higher than the students. Where they didn't want to give in that time. They didn't deserve that time because these [other] students are more ahead or more involved here. I've known these students longer. I can relate to these students.

We've all grown up [together], I know their families and shit like that. Then like me coming in and being the new kid, like my parents never really came up and showed up to the school. And I happened to have on a bracelet being on probation, so I kinda all looked bad. The teachers kind of looked at me and said, "Oh shit, this kid is going to be like the class clown and not paying attention and be disruptable to my class." A lot of what my teachers ended up saying is that, "He gets all the work, he can study, he's really smart, but he's just very disruptive sometimes." And I feel like me being outspoken, if I wasn't like the white kid just speaking up then I was a disruption.

A lot of the people [at this school] were Caucasian and White people that were very wealthy and had all their perfect families at home. Like everybody, like their mom and dad were married still and had big houses and everybody had cars and all these things. I found myself just I don't know, just not being able to relate to anybody there. I found myself, like them, thinking that I'm coming in with these struggles and being so outgoing and the class clown, and I'm not ready or I'm not good enough. You're not paying attention this one day or whatever so we're just not going to proceed to work with you because you don't seem like you're getting it this one time, so we're just done working with you. And it didn't seem like they [the teachers] cared. They only cared about that one really smart kid in class that was passing. They wanted to make sure they were doing good. And the people that were kind of falling, like drifting off, you're floating away already, you're too far. We're not going to grab you up at all. Now you're just by yourself. Just deal with it. You should have paid attention more or something like

that. Always using an excuse. Like it was always our fault. Like you're not the one paying attention, you're not the one studying enough, you're not putting hours in.

[At another school] I went to where everybody was down and poor and no one had cars really and you were lucky to have a car and you were probably working and paying it yourself. I wouldn't say that everybody was poor but everybody understood being in poverty and everybody was a lot of colors—there was not a lot of White people—everybody was almost neighbors, and knew each other. It was a community-based school. Because all these kids knew each other because they were all outside together, they didn't have homes to go to. They're all kicking it, you know. We had some colored teachers but a lot of the White teachers, they all grew up around the area so a lot of them knew family members and their sisters and brothers went to [the school]. They played jokes on us and they know that we joke around. And that made actually the class more, I guess, a disruption together, but that was what they were used to. Being able to communicate and everybody knows each other, being able to talk about it during the class. A lot of teachers didn't want to teach like that because they weren't used to that and they're used to everybody being quiet and [were] leaving [the school]. There was actually one teacher that I ended up quitting her job because she got way overloaded with stress and how her class was being way too obnoxious and disruptive. But we were all just working together, getting up moving, doing us [being ourselves], but doing our work. I guess moving doesn't look like work if you're sitting down.

You walk into class and you have all these expectations. And then there's like okay I have to follow these [rules], there's no way around these, there's no way of

bending these. And they don't communicate with you about it. I would like teachers to just for a whole class or the first two days of school, to introduce themselves, compare things to the students and tell stories. It should be story telling. Let's get connected on one base level. Let's talk about things outside the school. What's going on? How do you work around things? Like what's going to be really hard coming to this class? What are you not going to like about this class? What did you not like beforehand in your other classes? What can I do to accommodate you? Where can we meet in the middle? Things to relate. What music do you like as a teacher? What's your favorite movie? What's your favorite color? When's your birthday? You know, just things like that. They don't have to be so detailed. They can be those simple little things that everyone can relate to. Get notes from students that day, write some things down, read it. You might have to put in a little bit more time but you should be willing to do that to have a successful class if that's what you want.

You know what would be really cool for this project? If you got the other side. The teacher's side. If there's a chance, you should go to a public school, not BAS. The teachers that are in a regular high school. I guarantee you, they're going to get the answer: "It's so overwhelming and overloaded that I feel like I can't connect to my students because I'm not allowed to do that." It's almost like you're not allowed to create relationships. I feel like we're all adults. That we're all still young and a teacher can look so like they've got their life together and may be struggling so much at home. We have to see each other on a human being level. And it shouldn't be teacher-student. We're all here to learn something from each other you know. And the main focus of what I'm

trying to teach you right now is this and then you can gather things from those students and then they have their input on what you're trying to teach them.

And teachers, if they're not having a good day, come and say, "I'm not having a good day." A lot of people that are adults don't want to be seen as, "Oh damn, I'm struggling. I'm not supposed to be struggling." But if you don't let anything be known, a student can be doing something that they didn't know it was going to affect you [at the teacher] because it usually doesn't, but today it's going to. Now they get the whiplash and then they get themselves in trouble because they're not trying to have whiplash, they're trying to give it back and then it creates chaos. Somebody just needs to speak up. If the teacher is having a bad day, let it be known. "Yeah, I'm going to try and teach you as well as I can today." And [the students] knowing that, can probably teach you [the teacher] something. They'll take care of the class.

People will think, "Oh you're a drop-out, you're like nothing. You're never getting further, you know." But the fact with me [is], I made it this far. I have like 17 credits. Came to school to BAS and I was like "Oh shit, I don't care that I actually didn't make it through regular school." I'm glad I'm getting this opportunity to give it more time about my knowledge and my education and the system. It was a success. It made me open up more. It made me see more community. It made me go through way more experiences with other people and be able to branch out. I feel like I meet different people all the time. Yeah, it was a success because I'm still on my path of being able to get my GED and my diploma. I find myself intelligent. I may not have been able to deal

with it in a classroom setting of where they held expectations of what they wanted me to be, but I damn sure can take a test, study something, and pass it and retain knowledge.

I don't want to be anybody's leader, but my own and I want you to be able to be your own leader. I'm going to model what I feel gives me power and inspiration and you can take ideas from that for what would help you. I still have problems that I deal with. I still have things that I do that are not okay. I still take risks that I shouldn't be taking. And I don't want anybody to follow in those footsteps at all. But I'm not going to say you can't learn something from me. I'm an empathetic learner. We can learn something from everybody. You step into my perspective, and let me sit down and tell you my story on how I see this. You don't have to believe in it, you don't have to take my view, you don't have to call it your own. Just listen. Step into perspective. Yes, I'm an empathetic learner. Without even being a leader, I just learn.

Martin: “Society calls it dropout, but I just feel like I was saved.” I came here [to BAS] and I fucking love school now. I didn't think I would say those words. I never wanted to come to school before, but like yesterday I was freaking out because I was late to school. I love school cuz it's so easier and it's so chill. It's all hands on and shit. And always doing something. And math is easy here. Like regular school, I'd just sit there and watch my teacher. “What the fuck are you saying, man?” [At BAS] I just sit there and do my work and find help. I'll ask for help. And I don't have to worry about shit or the people. Everyone's just the same basically like has the same experience as you. Been through what you have been through. You guys [the teachers] are chillax. You guys are nice. Vibes, energy is terrific. It's cool. So, it's just like you guys connect already as it is,

so it's just a lot easier. No one thinks higher as themselves, everyone thinks of them as equals. No categories. It's like a big family basically.

I used to think everyone was an asshole in my other school. I mean I was an asshole. I mean if you walked towards me, I wouldn't move. I'd just walk towards you or we'd get into a fight basically. Yeah, I didn't like that I was an asshole, I mean cuz I'm not an asshole, I'm like chill as fuck. I always try to be nice to people. I try to be nice. But they just push me because they're so ignorant and stupid. The people just think they're all that like, "I'm cooler than you cuz I have money." They'll fuck you up like bump into me. Just a lot of people. I felt weird inside of high school. So, I'd have panic attacks just out of nowhere. I don't know why. Cuz sometimes my high school was like one hallway was like so crowded like everyone just bumping into each other and I'd like freak out. I'd just like start pushing people out of the way. Like "Get the fuck out of my way." It's too crowded. Like I can't do this. And I'd just get into fights.

There was a time when school was cool. There was a time when I was like, "Yeah, this school, I like school." But kids just made it a lot harder. I was one of those students. I wanted to learn, but the fact that those kids were yelling. It's hard. So, I just decided like not even to try I was just like, "Fuck it," basically. I really said that. I was like, "Fuck this shit." Can't do it. I just felt like an outcast in a way. They'd just be loud and I'd feel like they'd be talking about me cuz like glances and they'd be staring.

I feel like they set you up to fail basically. They wouldn't give me credits for other classes and I have to kind of show evidence I did work in that class. I never had a language class or elective classes 'til my junior year I got one elective class and that was

drawing. So, I didn't feel like I was going to graduate on time cuz how am I going to get seven or whatever credits for electives when I'm only doing one? I got a fucking A in that drawing class too. That's the only time high school was probably cool.

Oh yeah, racism. Yeah, I got called a beaner by some students. They just called me beaner for no reason. I didn't even know them. But like, what makes you think I'm a beaner? Is it cuz of the color of my skin? Or like what? Is it cuz I hang out with Mexicans? Or what? But there's a lot of like racist kids there and the teachers too. Some teachers would talk about the students. I'd hear them talk shit about other students. They'd be like calling kids stupid. I mean that's why I started acting up. So I just gave them a reason. I'm just not going to get called stupid for no reason. If I'm trying to try, I don't want to be called stupid. So I started being a fool.

And the teachers like they put me last basically. Like least important. So, they'd go to the athletic kids and like all those kids doing all their work and shit. And I'd be that kid that's just in the back that they didn't really care about in a way. I felt targeted a lot. And the principal had to talk to me about that. He had to ask me like, "Do you feel targeted at this school?" And I gave him a straight up answer. I was like, "Yeah, I do honestly." Like all I have is just a hat on or like shoes with like palm trees on there and they'd spot me a mile away. I was wearing fucking palm trees on my shoes and they thought they were marijuana leaves and shit. I was like, "What the fuck? We got kids running around here like half naked and you stop me?" That school was just fucking crazy. I did not like it. The teachers would be out in the halls too screaming at you to get to class sometimes. Like, "Get to class. Get to class." But, it was just stupid.

I couldn't go back cuz me and the principal really didn't like each other. So, I don't know why, I don't know how he made it to where I couldn't go back. They had to call the cops one time and bring me out of the class cuz I was just being too disruptive. Yeah, because we have a cop on campus, [so they] had to call him up and bring him up. I don't know kids in that class—just obnoxious and I just lost it one day and threw a water bottle at them. Yeah, so that's why they called the cops. I was like, "Damn, son!" I mean with the cops they could just tell me to go outside, they didn't have to bring them up there to take me out and shit. That's a little too much in my opinion. They just told me to get out like grabbed my arm a little bit and I told them, "Don't touch me." They didn't touch me. I'm glad he didn't. But they just kicked me off campus. Yeah, it was a weird experience in high school. Security guards just be walking around. It's kind of like a prison. [Another school] kicked me out and I just didn't go back. I was supposed to go back for an expulsion hearing.

I mean that's what success is: just doing what you need to do. And just try to get it done. When I dropped out of school, it's just I felt that was kind of a success because I hated school and I didn't like being there. And I didn't feel like school was for me. So, then I dropped out cuz I wanted to box. So, I did that. So, that's my definition of success: doing what you need to do. I wasn't really accomplishing anything. I really was just going there, smoking. That's all I did there. In my classes, I'd just draw. Or at lunch, I'd just ditch and just get high, come back and just sit there. I got kicked out and didn't go back. I was happy honestly when I got kicked out and dropped out. I was happy for a while. Then I worked at Taco Bell and I didn't feel like that was successful for me because, you

know, it's a dead end job. I'm not trying to make minimum wage. I mean I feel society calls it dropout, but I just feel like I was saved basically in my opinion. Because I'd lose my shit if I was still there. I feel like that [the term pushout] applies to me. Like they push you away, where you feel like you have to go away because of certain individuals or a group or something like bullying in a way. That's the reason why I left cuz of the people. I couldn't stand it. It's just too much.

Olivia: “Me and school have a love and hate relationship.” [At BAS] I love the environment. I love the students. I love the support. When I came here the day I was supposed to come for the orientation. I’m like, “This doesn’t even look like a school, this looks like a house or something. Like what the hell.” And I was like, “Okay, now I see where it kinda looks like a school,” but I’m like, “Damn this school is small.” Ever since then it’s just been a perfect fit for me. I used to go to a lot of different schools too, so for me to actually want to come here it’s like new and I’m like this is what I needed this whole time.

You guys [the BAS staff] actually show that you guys care and you guys are concerned. And even though this is a school, you guys treat us like family. I think that’s what makes it more easier for everybody to get along with the teachers. It just makes it better. It’s like you guys understand us. I think that’s another thing that makes it easier. We have teachers that actually understand. Coming from a big high school plus giving us homework and teachers not caring, we’re not getting the attention that we need. I think that’s what makes it better for us. Students and teachers get a better connection with each other. [BAS] makes it more comfortable to come to others because everyone makes the

environment good. I know I can learn something new every day, even if I don't know how to do it [at first]. I can come to [a BAS teacher] and explain, "Well, I don't get it this way." The teacher taught the class how to do it this way and I don't understand it. I know the teacher knows another way to help me understand to get this answer right. Every teacher walks in, if you're on your phone for a little while, [they are] going to come to you and going to tap on you until you get off your phone and do some work.

There needs to be better teachers. They need to learn how to just teach things more than one way because when students don't understand what to do and don't get help, they'll decide to not want to work at all. They don't want to do tutoring or nothing. My teachers [at previous schools] did not care. They wouldn't do anything. If I was to refuse to not work, they're going to allow me to put my work aside and let me do whatever I do. As long as I'm sitting there in class. I could be on my phone the whole time. They're going to let me slack off. They let us just fall behind. They don't care and then we're failing. They're like, "Oh it's because you have this missing assignment and this missing assignment and this missing assignment." It is my part to figure out where I'm at. But they'll just let you fall behind and that's not cool.

The teachers didn't put enough time into it because they'll just lay the instructions out and not make sure anyone understands. That's showing me you don't care if I get it or not. You're walking away, you're just leaving the instructions. How do you know I'm going to understand the way you're telling me these instructions like you're telling everybody else? And they just walk away. That's how I know they don't care versus here [at BAS]. You all will sit until we get it. Even though you have other students in the

classroom, you will sit and make sure that we get it. And that's just where that comes in at. That's how we know you guys care because you guys actually sit and take time. Some teachers [at other schools] will be rude after giving instructions because they're frustrated because they don't know how to tell you in a different way or they're just mad because you don't get what they're trying to tell you. I'll just stay back because I'm that kind of person, I give you enough respect—the same respect that you give me, I'm going to give you. So, if you going to disrespect me, I'm about to disrespect you. And that's just how it is. Everyone has a breaking point. I don't think that they're giving the students enough time. They're not making sure they understand it. I don't think that's fair to students because at the end of the day they expect us to get it especially on a test. Not everyone gets everything the same way. Everyone is different. Everyone's learning pace is different.

My mainstream school—the really main high school that I went to—I went back to it more than once and I will always go back if I could. I liked it, but it was just so much going on, so it was just like this is not for me. I had to go somewhere else. My mom was just like, “I'm coming to get you from school early one day.” Then she came up there. She withdrew me. I was under a lot of pressure. She just withdrew me out. I went home. I started crying. I was going through some stuff. I think she thought it was the school because she knew people that was in the same situation went to the school. Cuz my safety kinda was at risk. I was to a point to where I was doing good in school. My grades were getting back up. Shoot, I still wanted to go to school. I was mad she withdrew me. It was cool, it was just too much of a distraction. Too many people and

then people already knew me that already went there. I was comfortable [there] even through I kinda wasn't getting the help that I really needed.

These teachers wasn't catching my attention. I'm just going to be sitting in class with my phone out, I might walk around the hall. I might even leave school like for that period and then go to third. I do stuff like that. When I had my culinary class I left every day. I passed though. But I left every day. He took attendance, and I'm like, "Okay, I'm going now. Bye." When we did work, like when we studied and took tests, I was there, but after that I was gone. I always left. I already knew what I was doing. So, I'm like what's the point of me being here? I'm already passing. I never had a bad grade in that class, so I just left. Not as many teachers as students go there, so they're classes are big, I can't expect them just to always give me the help that I need. But I was never looking for the help that I need because I was doing whatever I wanted to do. I didn't care. That's all I kept saying, because it's so true. I hate it when I don't get it because I get frustrated. I be ready to quit. When I feel like I'm not getting the help, I won't do nothing. Just like in regular high school I didn't do nothing. I didn't get help. I'd sit there on my phone. I'd walk out of the classroom. I did whatever I wanted to do. [If you] see a student off, whether you're the teacher or not, you should—I feel like you should be on them. "Where you supposed to be?" They don't do that at regular high schools. They'll let you roam the hall.

In middle school, I would cry if I had an F. I'll cry to my mom like "Mom, I don't like this F, I need to do something about it." Next day, I'll go in and I'll get it back up to an A or B or whatever. But, high school, I didn't care about them grades. I was just like

one of those persons like, “I know I’m going to graduate.” My confidence was high, but I wasn’t up there. I was living above my means. I think high school is a whole different environment compared to middle school and elementary school. More things are around you, so you have to keep yourself focused, and motivated, and make sure you’re getting the help that you need. And if you can’t get it from the teacher, then you have to find it from somebody else. I had my times where I was doing good and going to work and keeping good grades and stuff, but then I’d go down and then I’d do good and then I’d go down.

I went [to another high school] for two days and it didn’t work for me. I literally begged my mom like, “Please take me out of this school,” It was too much pressure for me. I didn’t know where none of my classes were. I would be late to every class. And I would always have to go to the counselor’s office and be like, “I don’t know where this class is.” Every single time, so I’m late to every class. And you’re only giving me five minutes to walk all the way over there like, no, it’s not going to work. It was way too many people. And when it’s a lot of people, my patience gets short. Not that I dislike people, it just does. I feel kinda claustrophobic. And then that’s when I start to feel some type of rush and that’s when, I get irritated. When the rush comes because I’m like, “Why do I feel like this, I shouldn’t be feeling like this?” Because all these people are here. It’s just a lot to deal with. I couldn’t take it, that’s the reason why it didn’t last long and I knew it wasn’t going to last long. I told her, “Mom, I’m tired of going to new schools.” My mom didn’t even argue because how I explained it, she knew. It was either you take me outta this school and I’m not going or I’m about to get expelled. It was one or the

other. And that's how I really felt. I was just to a point where I just didn't care. Every time I went to a new school it was a whole different thing, so I never got a full lesson on most of the stuff.

I was mad at the world when I stopped going to school for a minute. I was like, "I just need some time to myself." And I think that's what I really did. Just took time to myself. Then, I was like, "Okay, it's been a year." I was mad. I used to break down a lot because I'm not used to that and for me to just take myself to that point is just crazy. But I used to be mad at the world. I used to just like, "Fuck it. Everything. Whatever." But then, I look at some people and be like, "I don't want to be like you, so I'm finna to get to it." I felt I wasn't doing nothing. It helps though—that little break that I had. It really did help because now I know what I'm looking for, now I know what I really want and I know how to get what I really wanted—the whole time! I wrote my goals down in a journal and then I was like, "This is what I need to do and this is how I'm going to get back in school. And this is what I'm going to do different." I was applying for jobs. I was trying to get into smaller schools that I feel would fit for me. I was taking my own GED tests and lessons online. I did all that by myself while I was out of school. I asked my auntie something every day. And then, I would spark the conversation. I had to find a way to teach myself. We'll go to the library and get books about, you know. Back then I wasn't [even] woke, now I'm conscious. So, you can't just come at me and tell me just anything. You can't be like, "Oh, your people was this and this and that." Because I'm going to look it up. And I'm going to call around and I'm going to figure this out some type of way. Even if I've got to read a book, I'm going to figure it out.

For me, dropout means for one, you're unconfident. You're not a hard worker. I'm working for my stuff. Well, I wouldn't say a failure because people can drop out and get their GED. That wouldn't be necessarily failing. I don't think dropping out is a success at all. I'm not saying it's stupid, but that's kind of how I'm saying it a little bit. Because who wouldn't want to be successful? So for you to just drop out, it's like you're giving up everything and why do that if you want to be successful? That shouldn't be your goal. I understand some people do it, but I wouldn't look at it as an option. Even though it's hard, what I've noticed through experiences, like in the beginning, it's always hard no matter what you do. I can't expect anything to be easy and that's what makes it better because you did all this hard work to pay off, to be successful. It's going to pay off for a lifetime, instead of just getting a regular job somewhere, and you're halfway happy. So dropping out isn't a choice because I want to go to school, to get this hardworking job. I want to be happy in the end. And for me to have a comfortable lifestyle.

You know honestly what I thought was a dropout? Someone who dropped out and just never came back to school. Like you just don't care. Like you're just not going to go to school ever again. So that's why I say I don't really consider myself as a dropout. Yeah, it did take a year to come back to school, but in that year I learned a lot. I learned how to ask for help because that's what I wasn't getting. I just learned a lot of things and to take it more serious, to take advantage. Because I want to be something. I didn't have that in other schools. So the whole year I was gone I was like pretty much preparing myself while not really noticing I was preparing myself for school again. Because now, everything I didn't use to do, I do at school. I'm seeing progress and it's good progress

every single time. Even though I was out of school. I still wouldn't consider myself as a dropout. I just took a break that's how I look at it. I just took a break. It felt like two years though.

Me and school have a love and hate relationship. I hate it, but I love it so much. I'm so bored without school. On the weekends, I don't do nothing. I be bored. Like where's Monday at? Where's Tuesday? Without school, I never have anything to do. I don't want to go out and have fun all the time. I want to do something that's going to help me be good. That's why I'm not working right now because my main focus is school and I kind of want to keep it that way. I'm doing pretty good at staying focused and it's actually really helpful. But they do look at you different. I'm doing the same thing as this person, this person just has a higher education level than me and it does make a difference. They get looked at different. We definitely get looked at different. And then, without education, you can't be nothing, you can't even get no job, you can't get in college. You can't do nothing. I don't want to be stressing. No, that's not an option. Failing is not an option. I tell myself that all the time. It's not an option. If I have to try it 10 times, I'm going to try those 10 times until I get it because failing is not an option. I can't let myself down. And I'm not going to let myself down, so I'm willing to do whatever it takes and however long it takes to do what I got to do, to be what I want to be.

Peter: “**They teach you to listen and conform.**” [BAS] keeps you on edge, but at the same time they do what they can to help you out. I think they do it for a reason though. Keep you motivated. They don't always give you what you want. They'll help

you out with what you need, but your wants and your needs are totally different. You guys [BAS teachers] actually care unlike high school teachers. You all are chillax.

One thing this school [BAS] helped me out with though is they helped me not feel stupid. Cuz like I dropped out because I was a junior with three credits. And I kept thinking to myself everyday like, “Man, what'd I do with my life? Where am I going to go? You know, I'm almost 18 this is not happening right now.” And I felt like so just doubting myself so much and I thought I was literally just mentally ill. And I came here and I just really started to see what I actually knew and it opened my eyes a lot. And now I see myself as a lot more intellectual than I thought I was.

Success is anything that you want to complete, a goal in your life, and ya finish it. You realize you want something, you stick to it. No matter how difficult that challenge is. If you want it, you'll do it. As a matter of fact that [definition of success] changed once I got here [to BAS]. Once I got here, that's what it turned into. You know, especially putting your mind to anything and succeeding in it. Like getting it done, that's success. Just cuz I never really thought about it. I've always been taught that if you tried and you didn't succeed, or you know you tried and you got somewhere close to it, you still failed. You didn't progress at all. So and then once I kind of took initiative and started thinking for myself instead of others, that really clicked. I mean even going through it with that in the back of my mind being like, “Well, I tried still.” So, I succeeded at something. I got somewhat farther than what I was before.

[At my previous high school], I went to school every day. I didn't skip or anything like that. I just didn't do the work. I was in it for the attention because I was always

bullied. And would just make people laugh. And that got me nowhere. Well, I mean I'm here now, but in the beginning it got me nowhere. And I started saying this in high school. "I'm a lion being raised by asses." So, what happens is I'm a proud person, I'm courageous when I was and then dropped down, and everyone else, they were being asses. And since I was a younger person in every grade, I would always say that I'm being raised by these asses because everything that I saw them do and whatnot, I took it in and was like, "Okay, I like that." And after that I was like, "Why do I want to be an ass? Why do I stoop to their level?"

That's one thing I do kind of admire about my parents for a while they wouldn't let me voice my opinion. I was scared to explain myself cuz if I voiced myself, I would feel like I got shut down automatically or I would feel like nobody's listening anyway. So, what's the point of saying anything? But after a while, I was like, "You know what, screw it. I'm my own person, they're not going to kick me out or anything. So, I'm just going to voice my opinion and state the facts and pretty much tell them what I am going to do. I'm not going to ask this time." And I was pretty much like, 'Hey, I need to drop out.' I don't know exactly when that happened, but they were like, "Okay." I was looking at my dad and was like, "You gotta face facts." Cuz he kept pushing me to go to school and I was like, "Look, you gotta face facts. I'm in the same boat as you were. I got three credits. I'm almost a senior. I'm almost 18 years old and I ain't got nothing going for me in high school. Like you can find an alternative school or put me to work. Those are the two options." So, I dropped out and went to work.

When you walk into a high school classroom, you lose your rights. That's the honest truth...all of it just everything just you lose them and you're like, "Okay, well now I'm a peasant." That's really what the education systems feel like now is like I'm a peasant and I have to listen to what they're saying even though I know it's not going to help me in the future, even though I know that I'll never use this, I still have to listen to it. That's how they teach you. They teach you to listen and conform.

I wish schools taught me how to do my taxes and how to start a mortgage and how to start a loan. The things that you need to know. Cuz my parents never taught me that. My parents are never going to teach me that because why, they're not really in my life. And high school is the education system preparing you for life, but really it's just preparing you for the work life. That's what I don't like is they're just teaching you how to work your asses off, enslave yourself. And when it's that time, you're right on the ball, Okay. Can't wait to make money, so that I can just constantly pay rent from check to check and live off food stamps. Kids would definitely enjoy learning more if they had a choice in what they wanted to learn. They're learning the same thing for four years. Because what you're learning in middle school is one step lower than what you're learning in high school. But it's the same subjects over and over again. And your electives are the same subjects that they were in middle school. If you have low G.P.A. they'll put you in special classes and shit. So I sat there and I learned the same thing twice in a day. They're trying to teach you how to live in a cubicle pretty much.

Ricky: "I ghosted out...I felt invisible to the teachers." If I had actually gotten what I needed, I would have my high school diploma. I just needed everybody to stop. I

needed everything to be okay. And for all of the crap to stop. Everyone to stop bullying me. That really affected me to the point where I was just terrified it [the bullying] was going to come back because I expected it. I developed PTSD. I just wish everything would have been alright. Then I wouldn't be half as messed up as I am. I feel I got anxiety because of school. I got depression. I feel like I got bipolar disorder because of school. But that's supposed to be a thing that you're born with. But I feel like it's because of school.

I would change everything literally everything about my previous high school. Nice, caring teachers. Nice people in general. No bullying. A caring teacher means being there for students. Helping them out whenever they need it. [At BAS] if we need something, you guys just let it happen. Whenever I'm here, if I'm having a bad day, I can be like, "I'm not having a good day." I will try to the best of my ability, but you guys are okay with me doing less work because of it.

I got bullied twenty-four seven since kindergarten. I was told to kill myself at least 50 times per hour and nothing was ever done. The first time I ever got a "kill yourself," I told my parents and they called the cops. The guy was in detention for a total of an hour and that's it. Just so that they can say he was put in detention. Even the teachers made fun of me and called me all sorts of names. I wasn't doing my work at all because I didn't have the motivation to keep going. My typical day would look like me going to cosmetology [class], going home, watching a tiny bit of TV and then going to sleep. Even when I wasn't in school, the constant "kill yourself" messages were on social

media. I wasn't open at all. I felt like if I came out then people would just give me shit about it. So I only told one or two friends, maybe three.

My school would take away your lunch as a punishment. I rarely ate breakfast because if I ate right whenever I get up, I feel sick. So whenever they took away my lunch, I was already starving at that point and I barely had anything at home because my parents are living check to check. My mom had to pay for her medicine, she had to pay for everything that insurance wouldn't cover. We had our water and electricity shut down for a little while and food barely. All that factored in and then I wouldn't eat at school.

When I started [at a new high school], they put me in 12th grade and said that I'm definitely going to be a super senior because I already had 11th grade credits, they couldn't put me in 11th. So they had to put me in 12th. I felt awkward at that point already cuz I couldn't say that I was a senior, but I couldn't say that I was a junior. That made me feel like I was in a bad situation. Like if I say that I'm a senior, [the students will] be like why are you here the next year and I wouldn't have an answer.

I've dealt with truancy basically my entire life. I missed apparently 10 days in a row even though I went half days. And then I got pulled out to go to a counseling appointment because this was whenever I was really in touch with how I felt and what was wrong with me. And at that point, I was working on my health a lot more. I had counseling appointments twice a week. I had at least three doctor's appointments per week cuz I had a lot of mental issues and I had a lot of physical issues too, mainly my right knee. And then yes, I would skip. Then, I get a letter in the mail after winter break saying that I can't come back until I reregister. At that point I was like, "Okay I'm not

going through that process again.” That process was hard enough the first time and then for me to have to do it again that same year for the same place, it was just no. I’d rather be out of school than do that, especially because that school wasn’t working. The large numbers of students were too much to handle. I’d have anxiety attacks every single day. I’d go to the bathroom and have an anxiety attack. If I went and talked to the IEP person¹⁵, he would always be like you need to calm down. This is how you’re going to do it. I was never allowed to just sit there and just try and help myself, which really sucked because that’s typically what I do for my anxiety attacks. But to be told that I’m not allowed to do that really sucks. Because that’s how I am. I would skip days on end mostly because in the morning I had anxiety attacks and I couldn’t go. The first day of school, I didn’t go. I got up and I got dressed and my sister was about to drive me and I started crying in the car and my sister couldn’t take me. She went and got my dad and I cried on him for hours.

I sort of feel like I succeeded by getting kicked out of school. But at the same time I didn’t cuz in reality they kicked me out because of my anxiety. My stress was way up there like to the point where I wanted to die. But I also skipped school and everything, so at that point I just wanted to be out of school anyway. And I knew that my [grandmother] wouldn’t let me quit school anyway. And I also made a promise to my mom that I wouldn’t quit school, so if I got kicked out then it would be better. So, I felt like I succeeded in what I wanted. To succeed at something, you get it done. I actually know

¹⁵ IEP stands for Individualized Education Program. The IEP person refers to the special education teacher.

the exact date that they put on the papers that I was kicked out. It was January 21st of last year.

I was happy to be out of school. But I feel like it's a good thing that I got out cuz I was sick and tired of having anxiety attacks every day. I was sick and tired of just having all of these things. And I needed to give myself a break. Cuz for the 12 years I was in school, I never gave myself a break. Like half a year after I dropped out—got kicked out—I started feeling like crap. I felt like complete crap because I'm not doing anything at all besides hanging out with my girlfriend. That was it. I would hang out with my girlfriend, eat a tiny bit and then go to sleep. I fell into a horrible depression. Like worse than ever, worse than whenever I was getting [messages saying:] “kill yourself.” Because I wasn't doing anything. So I felt like complete crap.

I think pushout means the same thing as kicked out. And dropout means you yourself are getting out of the school. If the school wasn't helping me, if I was having it worse than I should have, then how is that—then how am I going to get through it? **I ghosted out**¹⁶. I was there a lot of the time, but I wasn't there a lot of the time and I felt invisible to the teachers. They never saw me anyway. I felt like I wasn't there. Like the teachers rarely saw me, so they just ignored me whenever they did cuz I never did homework, I never did any work. So, anytime they would see me, they wouldn't see me.

Xavier: “Leaving kids alone when they struggle is part of the system and letting kids fail is part of what they do.” What brought me here was I just wanted to get my GED. And I just didn't know where to start from. I went to [a community college] to

¹⁶ Emphasis added by student participant when member checking

get my GED from there, but it didn't work. And then one of my friends told me about this school [BAS]. I was like, "I want to go try it." And when I came, I just fell in love with it. You know, the people, the environment, the support was amazing, so I was just like this is the spot for me, you know. And it's just like really close to my house. It's more a personal school because I feel like I let a lot of people down in my past and every time I came back to BAS and decided to come back and change my future. I feel like every time I came back, I feel like family, you know. This kind of school, this kind of environment, it was the school I was looking for. It's good to be here, a pleasure. Regular high school was just like I was learning a lot of things that I didn't really care about. Then coming over here [to BAS] you mainly focus on things that you want that will help you in your future. I feel like I can continue my future and I feel like a lot of opportunity that I can see, things I could do. It's like a pathway that looks so clear. I feel like I have goals like you know and those goals kind of push me. Like it's good to have somewhere you need to be. It's sort of like a destination, you know. Because once you don't, then you don't know where you're going. But I feel like now the apprenticeship, I have my barbershop going on here and there, get my GED, all that stuff.

What didn't work for me [at my previous schools] was I just had a thought that I won't ever pass high school cuz of the testing. Like the OAKS test [Oregon Assessment of Knowledge and Skill], you know. Like it was for me it was like I couldn't speak the language. Coming to America, coming from a different culture. It was hard, you know, it was hard. And then, I took it a couple times, I took it three times, no way that I was passing. So there was a thought in my head that I'm not going to pass it, so like why try,

you know. Why pass classes and then not graduate cuz you're not passing the OAKS test? So I just slacked off. I didn't do much, yeah. Overwhelming. And it like really put my confidence down, you know. I didn't really like school. I'm not the type of person who really liked studying and all that stuff. But when I came to freshman year, I had all A's and B's. Sophomore year I had A's and B's. And then when I just came to junior year, that's when it hit me, I was like, "I'm not passing, I'm not doing anything." You know, and I always wondered what it would be to get my high school diploma.

I understand the point of it [standardized testing]. They're trying to measure your intelligence like if you know things. Just find another way other than a test. Find another way to measure the students. I don't know how, but you find another way of doing that. I could read a word but not understand it, not know what it means, you know. Completely missing the point of it. And it put me into a state where like I would see my other friends pass it or whatnot and I would be like, "Man I've taken it so many times." What got me was I was trying. If wasn't trying it would have been kind of fair. But I was trying, you know. And to see my other friends be like, "Yeah, I passed it." I'd be like, "Oh my gosh, I need to get it together, man."

For me coming to the U.S. was like the land of opportunity. That's what my mom told me. I mean coming here is like we can't slack off, you know, try to get successful in America so we can help our people back in Africa and then just like, "Why I can do it? I can't pass these tests, so why try?" That was a bad choice. I talked to them [the teachers], but they told me that's how it is. Like you can't do anything about it, you know. There was no other option, no. You gotta pass, you gotta pass, you gotta pass. And I just didn't.

And they [my parents] think, they think it's easy and it's not easy. It's like a lot. It's not easy, you know. For me, if I could probably speak the language better, the tests it was probably easier and whatnot. I probably would have stayed in school, I probably, you know, get my high school diploma done. Which probably for me what killed it was the tests.

But, education for me back home [before coming to the U.S.] was really different from here. I was like the nerdy guy. I was the guy that everyone kind of looked up to. I was really good at school. Yeah, I was like really, really good. That's why I loved school so much cuz I had that, you know, background. And then when everything became hard [in the U.S.] it was just very difficult for me. [It would have been helpful to] have somebody there [at school] to kind of understand, you know. That maybe went through the same kind of thing you're going through. Kind of give you feedback, kind of guide you. When I was in high school, I didn't have a lot of help from my parents. Not to kind of look down on my parents or nothing because I feel like my parents, my mom, was just learning. I didn't have somebody to just be like, "Hey, just do this. Do this, do this, do this." I didn't have somebody to kind of look up to. I feel like somebody like a coach or something. I had like someone tell me "Hey do this, do that" but not from my point of view, you know. I have my parents always tell me "Hey, Xavier, you have to do..." I feel like they don't really understand the struggle you know. They don't understand being in my position, you know. And I never really had that person that's kind of been through it. I feel like in the future I would like to do that, be that kind of person that shows a student like some sort of counselor or advocate or something, you know.

For me in high school, I was all about chilling. I was all about partying, For me it was all about having fun, playing soccer, and parties, all that kind of craziness. It helped me with my language like speaking English. Yeah, I had a lot of good memories and also bad memories in high school. And also the influences. You know, the influences that's around you can really lead you into like bad stuff. Like I have friends, my older brother and his friends, you know. My older brother was from the streets. And me just looking up to him was just kind of leading me to get involved into that. And after a while it was just like, "Why go to school?"

The principal told me that [the school] wasn't working for me. That was kind of hard. My mom was with me and her hearing that was really bad cuz I would hide everything from my mom. Like I'm doing good. When she found out that was really...Oh, it hit me. That's when it hit me. That's when I felt like, man, like a failure. It was a really sad phase, you know, for me.

But, personally just talking about the past experiences that I had at different high schools and whatnot, it just feels like things that kind of stand out was that I wasted a lot of time just that I could have just make a difference. It showed that how many times that I kinda wasted. I feel like I could have just—well, it doesn't make a difference just talking about it, regretting anything, but I feel like I could have pushed myself a little harder, you know. A little disappointment, but I'm not giving up.

For me, I kind of consider myself a dropout when I left school because there's a lot of pressure on me. You know, most of my friends graduated. And then I just felt like I was a dropout. But...since I'm here [at BAS], I kind of feel like a success because I feel

like I'm working toward my future other than just sitting home doing nothing. Because I had a lot of that and that was not good. That was like a dead end.

The school system sucks and it has to be changed. I feel like teachers don't want to give the effort to help students because they want to make their jobs easier. And I think that letting kids—that leaving kids alone when they struggle is part of the system and letting kids fail is part of what they do. When I reached out [to teachers], it was always like I was asking too much and they felt like they were kind of getting frustrated with me, you know. I didn't understand because the language barrier. English was like my third language. Give me other options. [Teachers would say,] “Maybe you should drop this class and go to a different class that's more easier or something.” Which is like easier for me to just fall off. I feel like if I was more mentally prepared, the way I'm thinking right now, I feel I would have done great. It was all about the mentality and how young I was, the situation and how I was. I felt that they [the teachers] knew [that I was in that mentality]. I felt they recognized that, but they felt like they didn't want to bother because there was so many things they had to worry about. There's like a lot of students, and like a lot of work, like a lot of things. And they [the teachers] don't want to give that extra help, you know. And for me, I always used to come out goofy. Always trying to make jokes and whatnot. So teachers wouldn't—like my English teacher every time I would ask questions, when I used to be really serious, she would think I was playing around, like I'm picking on her. Kind of has to do with how I was, kind of the system of it.

Co-Constructed Themes

Together the YCRs and I generated the themes presented here with input from the student participants. We did not do a line-by-line analysis of the interview transcripts, instead we discussed the entirety of the stories we heard from student participants. The themes emerged through the conversations between the YCRs and myself and the discussions we had during the third group interviews with student participants. These conversations focused on what the YCRs and student participants found significant from the interviews and what changes to the education system they thought would have the greatest impact on improving the experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities. The questions we emphasized included: What is coming up for you as significant in what we have heard in these interviews? What do you think key stakeholders—teachers, administrators, parents, students, policy makers, etc.—most need to hear and understand about the past and present educational experiences of youth who attend alternative schools? When we present our research, what ideas, themes, experiences, and stories do we want to make sure to represent and share?

YCRs discussed what was significant at our meetings after the interviews and throughout the data collection process. We listened to the audio recordings of the interviews together and separately, taking notes on significant themes and ideas in what we heard. In particular, this work was done to prepare for the third group interview with the student participants. Together we brought ideas and themes to students in the third interview that we had heard across the interviews to clarify and validate our interpretations as well as to hear whether ideas from other interviews were also

significant or had impacted other student participants. From our data analysis, we co-constructed six initial themes, which were the focus of our first two presentations in June 2017: (1) Get to know your students, (2) Show care, love, and compassion for your students, (3) Students want to learn, but it looks many different ways, (4) Schools are places of anxiety and trauma, (5) Teachers are learners too, and (6) “Dropping out was [actually] a success.”

From August to October of 2017, four YCRs and I continued to meet and present together. Irisa, Lulis, Maria, Sk8, and myself refined the co-constructed themes through continued conversations and data analysis similar to what was described earlier. We also took into consideration the feedback we had gotten from the previous presentations in June. We discussed what questions people asked during the presentations and what they said were the main ideas and stories they took away from the presentations. We used this information to make sure that the ideas, stories, and recommendations for change that we wanted people to take away from our presentation, were in fact clear and emphasized in the presentation through the themes. As a result, we decided to focus and collapse some themes together in order to prioritize what the YCRs and student participants had said was most important for education stakeholders to hear about their experiences in education.

We were also highly influenced by a Skype conversation we had with Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade on September 27, 2017. We reached out to Dr. Duncan-Andrade after we heard him speak at a local lecture series in April 2017 through the Teaching with Purpose organization. After many months of attempts to connect, we finally spoke in

September. In our conversation, he pushed us to get as specific as possible with teachers in our presentations about what does and does not work for young people in schools, what teachers can do, and why it works or does not work. The YCRs were especially struck by the personal experience he shared about being a young person in a classroom who was going through challenging circumstances outside of school that most children should never have to experience. He struggled because he felt he had to leave his pain at the door when he entered school. He emphasized that schools cannot ask students to leave their problems outside of school because wounds cannot be taken off. He said, “The primary responsibility of a teacher is to be a healer” and that “teaching is a sacred act because students are sacred” (Duncan-Andrade, personal communication, September 27, 2017). We ended up using the phrase “Teaching is a sacred act” as the main theme to represent a couple of our previous themes. The final four co-constructed themes with sub-themes, which we used in our presentations in October, were:

1. “I felt invisible to the teachers” (previously, Get to know students)
2. “Teaching is a sacred act”
 - a. Show care, love, and compassion for students
 - b. Students want to learn, but it looks many different ways
 - c. What does an excellent teacher do?
3. “Regular high school is like drowning, it’s cruel” (previously, Schools are places of anxiety and trauma)
4. “Dropping out was [actually] a success”

The collaborative way in which we finally arrived at the above four themes reflects the decolonizing approach of YPAR, which strives to put the power over the message in the hands of the young people whose experiences are the center of the research (Mirra et al., 2016; Smith, 2012). As a co-collaborator and co-constructor of these themes with the YCRs, my interpretations and observations played a part in their creation. Through my awareness and vigilance of my positionality as an adult researcher without the same lived experiences as the YCRs, I navigated and attempted to mitigate the influence my power and privilege may have had on the research process. The prolonged time spent discussing the themes with the YCRs also helped to make sure that their voices, perspectives, and interpretations were foregrounded. We returned and re-returned to the themes many times—after receiving feedback from student participants, after numerous conversations together, and after time to continuously reflect on what was said in the interviews. In the next section, I will describe each theme, supporting it with what was said in the interviews and what the YCRs said during our presentations. It is my hope each theme is represented from the perspective of what students would like to say to those in power, in particular teachers and administrators, about what needs to change about the education system and what they can do differently to better support young people in school.

“I felt invisible to the teachers.” Across multiple interviews, student participants and YCRs mentioned that they did well in the classrooms of teachers who knew them and connected with them. However, there were barriers to building relationships with teachers. When trying to form connections between students and teachers, as Manny put

it, “It’s almost like you’re not allowed to create relationships” (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017). He went on to say:

I found that no one was really connected to the teachers. We only knew names. Had a conversation for the moment. And as soon as you’re out of that class, man they were just, you’re done now, you know. You don’t go to my class anymore. Some kids never knew the teachers or never were known by the teachers and it was almost like when they asked a question or when they weren’t there, “Oh this student’s not here. I didn’t even know we had this student.” I just found the teachers being unable to connect with all the students. (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017).

In the experiences of the student participants and YCRs, the more differences, both real and perceived, in the lived experiences and identities between the students and teachers, the more common it was for teachers to make assumptions about students. As a result, those differences between student and teacher, created more potential for discrimination and made it more likely that the teacher ignored the student and did not give the student the help that they needed.

In contrast to their previous experiences at their mainstream schools, the student participants credited their relationships with the teachers and staff at BAS as one of the main reasons why the school is working for them. Olivia stated that at BAS, “We have teachers that actually understand...I think that’s what makes it better for us. Students and teachers get a better connection with each other” (Olivia, Interview 1, April 13, 2017). Those relationships create a school environment, which more than one student participant

described as feeling like a family. According to Martin, “So, it's just like you guys [BAS teachers] connect already as it is, so it's just a lot easier. No one thinks higher as themselves, everyone thinks of them as equals. No categories. It's like a big family basically” (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017). Strong teacher-student relationships mean that students feel noticed—both seen and valued. Additionally, as student participants described, the strength of the connections between students and teachers impacts how well the teacher supports the student.

Several student participants described how teachers who did not connect with them, made assumptions about them, misjudged their behavior, and as a result, the student participants felt mistreated, ignored, and discriminated against by their teachers. Manny described how the disconnect between him and his teacher led to him being unfairly judged:

I would be in classes where the teacher felt like they were more privileged than the students. And being higher than the students. Where they didn't want to give in that time. They didn't deserve that time because these [other] students are more ahead or more involved here. I've known these students longer. I can relate to these students. We've all grown up [together], I know their families and shit like that. Then like me coming in and being the new kid, like my parents never really came up and showed up to the school. And I happened to have on a bracelet being on probation, so I kinda all looked bad. The teachers kind of looked at me and said, “Oh shit, this kid is going to be like the class clown and not paying attention and be disruptable [sic] to my class.” A lot of what my teachers ended up saying

is that, “He gets all the work, he can study, he’s really smart, but he’s just very disruptive sometimes.” And I feel like me being outspoken, if I wasn’t like the White kid just speaking up then I was a disruption. (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017)

Manny is describing how his behavior is coded by the teacher as disruptive and he attributes the teacher labeling him as disruptive because of his race, his background with the legal system, and the fact that the teacher spent more time with the students he or she related to more. He felt that a White student exhibiting the same behavior as him would be labeled “just speaking up,” while, as someone who identifies as Latino, he was labeled “disruptive.” Similarly, Noguera (2008) described how when educators do not question the assumptions they hold about young men of color, particularly Black young men, they “are labeled, shunned, and treated in ways that reinforce an inevitable cycle of failure” (p. xxi). As Maria, one of the YCRs, pointed out in one of our presentations, one way for teachers to begin to question their own assumptions about students and face their biases is to spend time getting to know their students.

Nearly every student participant who identified as a person of color, as well as the majority of the YCRs, described experiences in school where teachers were completely disconnected from them, did not hold them accountable, and had low expectations of their academic performance. These are examples of how racial bias and systemic racism create practices in schools that marginalize students of color (Emdin, 2016; Noguera, 2008). As Olivia described, in her experience:

They [the teachers] wouldn't do anything. If I was to refuse to not work, they're going to allow me to put my work aside and let me do whatever I do. As long as I'm sitting there in class. I could be on my phone the whole time. They're going to let me slack off. They let us just fall behind. (Olivia, Interview 1, April 13, 2017)

Irisa, one of the YCRs, described a similar experience, where some of the teachers and support staff gave her the label, Hall Monitor, which may have started as a way to build a connection with her, but was actually a sign of their low expectations of her. Irisa states:

Because if you think about it, even in my situation they started calling me names like "The Hall Monitor" and stuff. They [the school staff] knew that, but they never did anything. I kept on walking in the hallways for three years...but nobody said anything to me. (Irisa, Interview 9, June 5, 2017)

Irisa and Olivia's teachers were not holding them accountable to higher expectations. Perhaps these low expectations stemmed from racial bias and assumptions the teachers had about them. Perhaps the teachers misjudged their behavior because Irisa and Olivia were not assimilated to the White, middle class ways of showing engagement in a classroom. According to Emdin (2016), those students "who fail to acclimate to the structure of school are pushed out of school" (p. 111). Hence, the assumptions teachers make in terms of what supports students need in the classroom and whether teachers believe that students want those supports and want to be held accountable is the result of a disconnect between teachers and students.

In his research, Emdin (2016) found that, “the white teachers held perceptions about the students and the type of instruction that they needed that were rooted in bias” (p. 39). This bias is grounded in racism and given that less than one in ten teachers in Oregon identify as people of color (Oregon Chief Education Office, 2016), teachers’ misperceptions about students factor into why the pushout rate disproportionately affects students of color in Oregon. Manny described how a classroom that may have appeared loud and disruptive was actually one where he was most engaged. What helped him engage was “being able to communicate and everybody knows each other, being able to talk about it during the class” (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017). However, “A lot of teachers didn’t want to teach like that because they weren’t used to that and they’re used to everybody being quiet and [teachers were] leaving [the school]” (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017). In order to prevent the disconnection between how teachers believe students should be taught and how students know they learn, it is important that teachers get to know how students learn and support how they learn in the classroom.

When teachers make assumptions and are disconnected from what a student needs, the potential to do harm to students is alarming. These assumptions can lead teachers to form stereotypes about students and start to label them. When students are labeled and sorted by academic ability and behavior, this practice often serves to reinforce the behaviors and even worse, students begin to internalize these labels (Noguera, 2008). According to Martin, he purposely lived up to the labels he was given by the teachers at his school:

They'd be like calling kids stupid. I mean that's why I started acting up. So I just gave them a reason. I'm just not going to get called stupid for no reason. If I'm trying to try, I don't want to be called stupid. So I started being a fool. (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017)

Although Xavier's teachers did not overtly call him stupid, their solution to his request for help impacted his self-worth. Xavier stated:

When I reached out [to teachers], it was always like I was asking too much and they felt like they were kind of getting frustrated with me, you know. I didn't understand because the language barrier. English was like my third language. Give me other options. [Teachers would say,] "Maybe you should drop this class and go to a different class that's more easier or something." Which is like easier for me to just fall off. (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017).

Xavier went on to describe one of the supports that he wished he had gotten from his teachers:

When everything became hard [in the U.S.] it was just very difficult for me. [It would have been helpful to] have somebody there [at school] to kind of understand, you know. That maybe went through the same kind of thing you're going through. Kind of give you feedback, kind of guide you. (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

Xavier's comment illuminates the importance of having a teaching staff that reflects the cultural backgrounds and shares the lived experiences of its students. His comment also reflects the kind of teacher Xavier needed—one who built a relationship with him,

listened to his story and struggles, and with Xavier's guidance found creative ways to support him to achieve high academic expectations. Instead, when teachers pushed him away into easier classes to "just fall off," in Xavier's words, "it really put my confidence down" (Interview 2, April 20, 2017). Although Xavier highlighted many ways in which the school system failed him throughout the interviews, he still blamed himself for not getting his high school diploma. For example, he said, "I felt like, man, like a failure. It was like a really sad phase, you know, for me" (Xavier, Interview 2, April 20, 2017). In a later interview, he put the responsibility of leaving school on himself, saying, "I feel I could have pushed myself a little harder, you know" (Xavier, Interview 9, June 5, 2017). Xavier's story shows one example of the harm that teachers' assumptions, misperceptions, and biases can have on how students see their own value, intelligence, and ability to contribute meaningfully to their community.

According to the student participants, strong teacher-student relationships have an important impact on whether they feel successful in school. Their stories show how harmful the disconnection between students and teachers can be for students. One of the YCRs, Irisa, reflected in her researcher notebook: "Another thing my school taught me was that it's ok if you don't succeed and it's ok if your [*sic*] late to class and you don't have to be responsible" (Irisa Ramiz, Researcher notebook, no date). Misconceptions and assumptions about students and how they learn, can lead to ineffective and harmful teaching practices, in particular ones that perpetuate systemic racism and marginalize students of color. Additionally, labeling students can reinforce low expectations and stereotypes, potentially causing students to internalize those labels. As stated throughout

this section, the YCRs and student participants' advice to mitigate this disconnect between teachers and students is for teachers to take ample class time to get to know students and to share with students about themselves. In our presentation, the YCRs had these recommendations for teachers about getting to know their students: (1) getting to know your students takes priority over starting to teach content, (2) learn about your students lives outside of school as well as how they learn, (3) let students have a say in how much and when they share information about themselves, and (4) share about yourself with students and let them get to know you. In his interview, Manny gave very specific advice for teachers trying to get to know their students:

“I would like teachers to just for a whole class or the first two days of school, to introduce themselves, compare things to the students and tell stories. It should be story telling. Let's get connected on a one base level. Let's talk about things outside the school. What's going on? How do you work around things? Like what's going to be really hard coming to this class? What are you not going to like about this class? What did you not like beforehand in your other classes? What can I do to accommodate you, where can we meet in the middle?” (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017)

Manny continued by saying, “We have to see each other on a human being level. And it shouldn't be teacher-student. We're all here to learn something from each other you know” (Interview 10, June 8, 2017). When teachers learn from students and get to know them, they are showing students that they care, which is a key component of the second co-constructed theme described in the next section.

“Teaching is a sacred act.” As mentioned earlier, this phrase came from a Skype conversation that the YCRs and I had with Dr. Jeff Duncan-Andrade. In the previous section, student participants and YCRs taught us that strong teacher-student relationships have a profound impact on students’ potential to achieve and on the development of their self-worth. Hence, the work of teachers is incredibly important because it is about holding, valuing, validating, and caring for young people, who are sacred (Duncan-Andrade, personal communication, September 27, 2017). “Teaching is a sacred act” means viewing teaching as more than just helping students gain mastery over content. Instead, it means viewing teaching as caring for young people, respecting their individuality and dignity, and educating whole persons with physical, moral, social, emotional, cultural, and spiritual identities that need nurturing (Noddings, 2007/2013; Valenzuela, 2005). Students cannot leave their pain and wounds at the classroom door. They need their teachers to recognize, address, and have compassion for what they are going through, instead of expecting them to show up without problems from outside of school. In other words, “the primary responsibility of a teacher is to be a healer” (Duncan-Andrade, personal communication, September 27, 2017). By building a connection with students and getting to know them, teachers will be better equipped with the knowledge of how their students learn and how to show care and compassion for them. The YCRs and I split this co-constructed theme into three sub-themes: (1) show care, love, and compassion for students, (2) students want to learn, but it looks many different ways, and (3) What does an excellent teacher do? For the first two sub-themes, I will share how student participants and YCRs defined and described “teaching as a

sacred act,” and then with the last sub-theme, I will share the advice from students about how teachers can approach “teaching as a sacred act.”

Show care, love, and compassion for students. Overwhelmingly, the YCRs and I heard again and again from the student participants that their teachers did not care for them. Valenzuela (1999) described how teachers and students may be operating under different definitions of caring, so that teachers may believe they are caring, but may be unconsciously communicating the exact opposite message to students. Here is how Olivia described her experience of her teachers showing her that they did not care:

The teachers didn’t put enough time into it because they’ll just lay the instructions out and not make sure anyone understands. That’s showing me you don’t care if I get it or not. You’re walking away, you’re just leaving the instructions. How do you know I’m going to understand the way you’re telling me these instructions like you’re telling everybody else? And they just walk away. That’s how I know they don’t care versus here [at BAS]. You all will sit until we get it. Even though you have other students in the classroom, you will sit and make sure that we get it. And that’s just where that comes in at. That’s how we know you guys care because you guys actually sit and take time. (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

For Olivia, a caring teacher would take the time to sit with her and would check-in to make sure that she understood the lesson. Ricky¹⁷ also described how:

A caring teacher means being there for students. Helping them out whenever they need it. [At BAS] if we need something, you guys just let it happen. Whenever

¹⁷ Ricky identifies as gender fluid and uses the pronouns they, them, their.

I'm here, if I'm having a bad day, I can be like, "I'm not having a good day." I will try to the best of my ability, but you guys are okay with me doing less work because of it. (Ricky, Interview 8, June 1, 2017)

Ricky described how a caring teacher will provide the help that they need according to Ricky's guidance, instead of helping out in the way that the teacher believes Ricky needs. A caring teacher is also aware of how students are doing and is responsive to their needs. A caring teacher creates an environment where students feel comfortable telling them how they are doing.

Students also described how a caring and supportive teacher is someone who lovingly holds their students accountable and shows their students that they will care about them by holding them to high expectations even when it is difficult. When talking about teachers that cared about her at her mainstream school, Irisa stated:

I feel like what they did was they really checked up on you. [One of my teachers], he called my mom. He was like, "So do you know where your daughter is?" Even though I got in trouble with my mom because I wasn't there. I still felt good that he did that because I ended up coming back to class because [of] my mom. He did that all out of love and all out of care because he's like, "I want to see you succeed like I know you're a great student, you just need to apply yourself, you need to like work. You can't just come into the classroom and like do nothing." Every time I come into the classroom, I'd try to slack off. He wouldn't allow me to at all. Like there was no option to be coming in there and slacking off. (Irisa, Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

Irisa's teacher made sure she knew that his actions were out of love and care because he told her that he wanted her to succeed and he believed that she could. In contrast, Xavier, describes how he did not get held accountable by his teachers when he needed it even when they knew he needed support:

It was all about the mentality and how young I was, the situation and how I was. I felt that they [the teachers] knew [that I was in that mentality]. I felt they recognized that, but they felt like they didn't want to bother because there was so many things they had to worry about. There's like a lot of students, and like a lot of work, like a lot of things. And they [the teachers] don't want to give that extra help, you know. (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

Xavier's teachers did not hold high expectations for him and did not give him the extra time and help he needed. Although these teachers did not come out and say it, their inaction communicated the opposite of what Irisa's teacher told her, namely that they did not think Xavier would succeed.

Student participants and YCRs reported feelings similar to Valenzuela's (2005) assertion that students "prefer to be *cared for* before they *care about* school" (p. 91). Conversely, "teachers expect students to *care about* school in a technical fashion before they *care for* them" (Valenzuela, 2005, p. 83). From the previous co-constructed theme, we know that student participants and YCRs felt disconnected from their teachers and that their teachers made assumptions about them. Both the social and cultural distance in student-teacher relationships and the expectation that students show they care about

school before teachers show care for students contribute to teachers' beliefs that students do not care about school (Valenzuela, 1999). For example, Friday states:

Even with the teachers, a lot of them really blatantly didn't care about the [students in their] class. If you didn't ask questions and weren't down their throats about it, it's like I'm not that kind of person. I just didn't try because [of] the teachers. Either it was like you understood what they were talking about or you didn't and they didn't care about you. So, it's like people who sat in the front, they cared about. But anybody else they just didn't really care about. (Friday, Interview 3, April 27, 2017)

When student participants did not actively seek out help, raise their hand, sit in the front of the room, and do all their work, their teachers made the assumption that they did not care. As a result, their teachers' behaviors toward them only served to confirm that their teachers did not care about them. Martin describes his experience of how his teachers did not care:

And the teachers like they put me last basically. Like least important. So, they'd go to the athletic kids and like all those kids doing all their work and shit. And I'd be that kid that's just in the back that they didn't really care about in a way. (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017)

Similarly, Ricky felt ignored and invisible to their teachers:

I felt invisible to the teachers. They never saw me anyway. I felt like I wasn't there. Like the teachers rarely saw me, so they just ignored me whenever they did

cuz I never did homework, I never did any work. So, anytime they would see me, they wouldn't see me.

(Ricky, Interview 8, June 1, 2017).

It was not that these students did not care. They did not feel cared for by their teachers. Although we cannot say for sure, if teachers had consistently shown that they cared for these students—checking in on them, getting to know them, spending extra time with them—they may have, over time, become more engaged in the class because they could see signs that their teacher cared about them.

When showing compassion and love for students, teachers approach students with humility because teachers cannot know everything that students are facing, their daily struggles, or what is going on in their lives (Emdin, 2016). However, given what we have already heard from student participants, they believe it is important that teachers try to get to know students, so that they have a better idea of what they go through both inside and outside of school. As Ricky explained, their school's disciplinary action showed little compassion for their home situation or personal needs, and as a result did harm:

My school would take away your lunch as a punishment. I rarely ate breakfast because if I ate right whenever I get up, I feel sick. So, whenever they took away my lunch, I was already starving at that point and I barely had anything at home because my parents are living check to check. My mom had to pay for her medicine, she had to pay for everything that insurance wouldn't cover. We had our water and electricity shut down for a little while and food barely. All that factored in and then I wouldn't eat at school. (Ricky, Interview 8, June 1, 2017)

Ricky's experience illustrates that while holding students accountable can be caring and supportive, it must be done in a way that shows compassion for their life situation and treats them with dignity. Although checking-in with students when they are struggling is important, Friday cautioned that students also need space and choice around when and what information they share:

My old school and my old, old school, they'd like always be in your business. If you looked sad or you'd be angry, they'd be taking you out in the hall and they wouldn't let you leave without talking to them. You'd have to tell them why. It was horrible. They always want to say that they have a community and like a family vibe there, where it's like you can talk to them, but the thing I like about here [at BAS] where it's like if you're having a bad day, you don't have to talk to them. You give us space. (Friday, Interview 5, May 4, 2017)

Caring for students also means that teachers give them time and space to share their needs and struggles while building a trusting student-teacher relationship.

As students described, many students need to feel cared for by their teachers before they show that they care about school. Caring for students means that teachers hold them accountable, do not give up on them, and affirm them. Additionally, the way in which students are held accountable needs to demonstrate compassion and respect for their lived experiences. Showing care, love, and compassion for students can look many different ways. Similarly, students learn and demonstrate their learning in multiple, different ways.

Students want to learn, but it looks many different ways. Another common frustration the YCRs and I heard from student participants was that their teachers only taught them in one way. Olivia described that when teachers only teach content in one way, students are more likely to give up. She explained:

There needs to be better teachers. They need to learn how to just teach things more than one way because when students don't understand what to do and don't get help, they'll decide to not want to work at all. They don't want to do tutoring or nothing. (Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

Olivia also experienced teachers who would get frustrated when they did not have another way to teach students, which in her case led to conflicts between her and her teachers. She stated:

Some teachers [at other schools] will be rude after giving instructions because they're frustrated because they don't know how to tell you in a different way or they're just mad because you don't get what they're trying to tell you. I'll just stay back because I'm that kind of person, I give you enough respect—the same respect that you give me, I'm going to give you. So, if you going to disrespect me, I'm about to disrespect you. And that's just how it is. Everyone has a breaking point. (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017).

Manny had a similar experience when he was asking for help from his teacher after not understanding how the teacher was presenting the lesson. Manny explained:

Asking for help, not understanding so I just would be like, "Man." And [the teacher] would be like, "Why are you not getting it?" And he would be frustrated

that I'm not getting it. He could only teach it one way. So then he's getting frustrated and it frustrated me. Okay, we're both frustrated so, I'm just going to leave. I find myself leaving and skipping class and being like, "Oh shit." Now since I've left class, I might as well go do something and leave school and come back at lunch. And I just end up skipping more classes and walking down the hallway, getting into trouble. (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017)

In his case, Manny chose to leave before there was a conflict visible between him and his teacher. However, leaving class meant that he ended up skipping more classes. According to Olivia and Manny, it is important that teachers are prepared with multiple ways to teach and learn their content. By presenting different ways to learn and understand content, teachers "legitimize multiple models of excellence, e.g., mechanical, artistic, physical, productive, academic, and caretaking" (Noddings, 1983/2013, p. 190). Hence, when teachers remain patient and calm when students ask for another method, it communicates to students that it is completely normal, acceptable, and important for people to understand things in different ways.

Several student participants and YCRs mentioned their struggles with standardized testing because it only offered one way for them to show their understanding of content. Olivia stated that it is not fair to expect students to show their learning in the same way and in the same amount of time. She explains:

I don't think that they're giving the students enough time. They're [the teachers] not making sure they understand it. I don't think that's fair to students because at the end of the day they expect us to get it, especially on a test. Not everyone gets

everything the same way. Everyone is different. Everyone's learning pace is different. (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017).

Xavier struggled with standardized testing. He states clearly that the standardized testing prevented him from getting his high school diploma. He asserted:

For me, if I could probably speak the language better, the tests it was probably easier and whatnot. I probably would have stayed in school, I probably, you know, get my high school diploma done. Which probably for me what killed it was the tests. (Xavier, Interview 2, April 20, 2017).

In a later interview, Xavier elaborated about standardized testing:

I understand the point of it [standardized testing]. They're trying to measure your intelligence like if you know things. Just find another way other than a test. Find another way to measure the students. I don't know how, but you find another way of doing that. I could read a word but not understand it, not know what it means, you know. Completely missing the point of it. And it put me into a state where like I would see my other friends pass it or whatnot and I would be like, "Man, I've taken it so many times." What got me was I was trying. If wasn't trying it would have been kind of fair. But I was trying, you know. And to see my other friends be like, "Yeah, I passed it." I'd be like, "Oh my gosh, I need to get it together, man." (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

While Xavier believed that there were other ways for him to show his understanding rather than a standardized test, he still began to internalize feelings of academic failure. Instead of seeing his struggles to pass as the fault of the test, he stated that he needed to

“get it together” and try harder, as though it was his fault. Noddings (1983/2013) asserted that “there is more to life, more to excellence, more to success, and more to devotion than can be captured in a single intellectual model of excellence” (p. 191). And yet, standardized tests are often presented in schools as the single intellectual model of excellence. As a result, students begin to connect their academic ability and self-worth to whether they can pass the standardized test, despite the fact that there are many, legitimate ways to show understanding. When students internalize these feelings, as Xavier, it does harm to students and the value they see in themselves.

As we have heard from students, it is important for teachers to honor and legitimize students’ multiple approaches and ways of learning because it values their ways of being and helps them develop a positive self-worth. The last sub-theme serves to summarize the advice from student participants and YCRs, which we have read throughout this section, about what an excellent teacher does to embody the concept that “Teaching is a sacred act.”

What does an excellent teacher do? In our presentations, the YCRs and I wanted to be clear about what characteristics and actions students attributed to their favorite teachers both in their mainstream and alternative schools throughout the interviews. We summarized this list in our presentation and it can be found in Table 12 below. Although this list is certainly not exhaustive, it is our attempt to capture how students described what makes an excellent teacher from their perspectives.

Table 12

Summary of How Students Described the Characteristics of Excellent Teachers

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have multiple ways/approaches to teach • Keep students accountable • Give extra support/tutoring • Go above and beyond • Give out phone number • Check up on students and call home • Learn from students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Share info about their family and personal life, as appropriate • Understand • Let students know they want them to succeed • Stand up for students • Never give up on finding a way to work with students
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Many of these characteristics of excellent teachers are highlighted in Ame's description of her teachers in her mainstream schools. Ame explained:

Schools need better teaching. Mainly the teachers would be really docile and not enthusiastic. In normal schools, it's like they don't really give a shit. It's like a lot of the time they just put the paperwork on the main screen and then you copy it. [One of my favorite teachers], he would get on me. He actually stood up for me when I was getting bullied. His math class is my favorite because he'd sit with me during lunch. And we'd eat together and we'd work on math, so I could get it done. He would make me give him my phone at the beginning of class. If he knew you were a student that would mess around on your phone. If you didn't, then you didn't have to. If I was in a bad mood, [the teacher] would realize it and rather

than working with other students, he'd work with me because he knew that I was a student like if I'm in a bad mood, then something's going on and I need more help. (Ame, Interview 7, May 26, 2017).

Ame's favorite teacher had her back, spent time outside of class helping her, held her accountable to high expectations, and knew when she was having a hard day. He showed care, love, and compassion in the way that she needed it and honored her way of learning, in particular on a day where she was struggling and was in a bad mood. "Teaching as a sacred act" means that teachers honor the student as a whole person, respect their dignity, validate their multiple identities, value their humanity, and recognize their struggles with compassion. It means that teachers prioritize the care of students and their multiple ways of being in their classroom over the content they are teaching. Excellent teachers recognize and care for students who are hurting in their classrooms and do not expect them to leave their problems from outside school at the classroom door. However, as I will discuss in more depth in the next section, students' pain is not always coming from outside of school, it is sometimes the school itself that is inflicting harm, causing anxiety, and traumatizing and re-traumatizing students.

"Regular high school is like drowning, it's cruel." It was very difficult for the YCRs and I to listen to the numerous stories from student participants about the traumatic events they experienced in school. For many of the YCRs, it reminded them of similar traumatic experiences from their own past. At times, our conversations debriefing the interviews were heavily focused on processing the emotions coming up for each of us after hearing these stories of trauma, anxiety, fear, anger, and powerlessness from the

student participants. We tried to support each other as each person needed—whether that meant listening to each other’s stories, naming and acknowledging our own hurt, allowing people space or time away from participating in interviews, and/or sharing acts of gratitude and care toward each other and ourselves. A couple of YCRs were brave in initiating these conversations and together we co-created space for these emotions to be discussed as part of the data analysis process. This section will focus on the stories we heard from student participants and YCRs about the traumatic experiences and anxiety they felt in school. These stories are centered on students’ experiences of fear, powerlessness, and anger in the school and the impact of these experiences on the students themselves in their own words.

Several student participants did not feel safe in their schools because of a fear of bullying and sexual harassment that was left unchecked by teachers and school administrators. Physical and emotional safety is crucial to the learning process; Antrop-González (2011) identified providing a safe space to students as one of the three key components of a school as a radical sanctuary. In the words of the student participants, their schools were not sanctuaries, but places where bullying and sexual harassment was commonplace. Ame described how her decision to leave school centered around bullying and the lack of intervention from staff:

I left school because of major bullying. I remember freshman year, I got shoved into a locker and I was in there for about 15 minutes. The kids who put me in there, broke the outside of the locker, so they had to take the locker [door] off to get me out. My mom had issues with it. She spent about two months dealing with

the schools about the [bullying] issues and they didn't do anything about it...My mom wasn't having it and the teachers were seeing it [i.e., the bullying]. I hated every single one of my teachers because of that. (Ame, Interview 2, April 20, 2017)

She went on to describe how she also experienced sexual harassment from peers:

When I first started going my freshman year, they had slap ass Fridays. A football senior came up and touched my butt. I told people all the time. I'm like, "Excuse me, I'm being sexually harassed by football players on the football team." [The teachers would say] "You're lying." I would tell them straight up the minute I started walking past them, "You touch me, I'll drop kick you in the throat." I didn't tolerate that. (Ame, Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

Ame was not silent about calling out the bullying and sexual harassment, and yet the staff accused her of lying and she experienced multiple times where staff witnessed the bullying and did nothing. Her solution was to take matters into her own hands—to threaten violence, fight back, and then eventually to leave school. She was not the only student to experience sexual harassment at school, Bee, one of the YCRs, experienced sexual harassment from a teacher. She described how:

A lot of the teachers were like super racist or pervy. The PE coach I had—I refused to dress down in his class and I refused to participate at all because he had the girls do jumping jacks while the guys were playing basketball. And yeah that's not okay. It was like he was told on a lot, but they never kicked him out. I think he's still working there. (Bee, Interview 5, May 4, 2017)

Again, though it was known that students were experiencing this teacher's behavior as sexual harassment, as far as Bee knew, nothing happened to the teacher and he continued to be employed at the school. Lack of intervention is a key component to these students' feelings of a lack of safety and fear at their schools. Both Ame and Bee spoke out about what was happening in their schools and saw little to no action to stop the bullying and sexual harassment. As a result, they had little faith that the school would keep them safe.

Ricky also experienced bullying at their school except in their case their teachers were not just complicit in the bullying, they were actually participating in it. Ricky explains:

I got bullied twenty-four seven since kindergarten. I was told to kill myself at least 50 times per hour and nothing was ever done. The first time I ever got a "kill yourself," I told my parents and they called the cops. The guy was in detention for a total of an hour and that's it. Just so that they can say he was put in detention. Even the teachers made fun of me and called me all sorts of names. I wasn't doing my work at all because I didn't have the motivation to keep going. My typical day would look like me going to cosmetology [class], going home, watching a tiny bit of TV and then going to sleep. Even when I wasn't in school, the constant "kill yourself" messages were on social media. (Ricky, Interview 4, May 4, 2017)

Ricky's experience of being bullied impacted their emotional and physical health.

According to Ricky, "My stress was way up there like to the point where I wanted to die" (Ricky, Interview 8, June 1, 2017). In fact, they believed that these traumatic and

prolonged experiences of bullying had long-term effects on their mental health. Ricky describes how:

I just needed everybody to stop. I needed everything to be okay. And for all of the crap to stop. Everyone to stop bullying me. That really affected me to the point where I was just terrified it [the bullying] was going to come back because I expected it. I developed PTSD. I just wish everything would have been alright. Then I wouldn't be half as messed up as I am. I feel I got anxiety because of school. I got depression. I feel like I got bipolar disorder because of school. But that's supposed to be a thing that you're born with. But I feel like it's because of school. (Ricky, Interview 4, May 4, 2017)

Ricky feared that the bullying would continue even when they came to BAS. Imagine the fear Ricky felt about being in a school given that they attributed school to their development of post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), anxiety, and depression. While we often associate PTSD with combat veterans, Emdin (2016) found that young people enrolled at an urban high school also exhibited symptoms of PTSD. Ricky is not alone in their experience. While teachers and administrators may acknowledge that students bring in trauma from experiences outside of school, students' are traumatized and re-traumatized by experiences in school, with serious, long-term consequences to the health and well being of young people¹⁸.

¹⁸ I cannot share Ricky's story without acknowledging their bravery in telling it to the YCRs and myself. Ricky chose to do the second interview one-on-one with me because they were afraid of judgment. Ricky shared, "I always feel judged, so if it's less ears around me, it feels better" (Ricky, Interview 9, June 5, 2017). They were also unsure of how sharing the information would make them feel in the moment. Several times Ricky told me that they might need to just get up

Student participants reported that their schools felt like prisons and that schools were set up to teach them to listen and conform, all of which contributed to their feelings of powerlessness. The school-to-prison pipeline refers to the disproportionate number of young people from historically marginalized communities that are being funneled from schools into the criminal justice system through harsh school discipline policies and practices. During the 2011-2012 school year, 3.45 million students were suspended at least one time with 260,000 students referred to law enforcement and 92,000 arrested on school property (Redfield & Nance, 2016). These statistics do not do justice to the personal impact these experiences have on students, nor the indignities students suffer when law enforcement is involved in school discipline. Here is how Martin described his experience when the cops were called to pull him out of class:

They had to call the cops one time and bring me out of the class cuz I was just being too disruptive. Yeah, because we have a cop on campus, [so they] had to call him up and bring him up. I don't know kids in that class—just obnoxious and I just lost it one day and threw a water bottle at them. Yeah, so that's why they called the cops. I was like, “Damn, son!” I mean with the cops they could just tell me to go outside, they didn't have to bring them up there to take me out and shit.

and leave if they felt upset, although they never did leave an interview. To calm their nerves, they often brought a Rubix cube or fidget spinner into the interviews. They were also worried that talking about their experiences in their past schools may trigger depression. At the end of one interview Ricky said, “Right now I’m just trying to make my brain go back to positivity” (Ricky, Interview 8, June 1, 2017). To do so, Ricky relied on their own supports, their advocate (school counselor) at BAS, and the support from the YCRs and myself. While it was difficult for them, Ricky said that overall, “If anything I feel like it [the interviews] grew people together, stronger.” (Ricky, Interview 9, June 5, 2017).

That's a little too much in my opinion. They just told me to get out like grabbed my arm a little bit and I told them, "Don't touch me." They didn't touch me. I'm glad he didn't. But they just kicked me off campus. Yeah, it was a weird experience in high school. Security guards just be walking around. It's kind of like a prison. (Martin, Interview 5, May 5, 2017)

Students of color, like Martin, are more likely to be affected by harsh school discipline practices and be referred to law enforcement by their school. According to the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights (2014), Black students and American Indian and Native-Alaskan students are disproportionately suspended and expelled. In fact, they found that students of color were being disciplined more harshly and more frequently because of their race (Redfield & Nance, 2016). There is no evidence that policies that frequently exclude students who misbehave from school are improving school safety (Redfield & Nance, 2016). Conversely, students may feel weird, uneasy and unsafe, as Martin described, with the added presence of security guards in school and harsh discipline policies. At worst, the prison-like environment and exclusionary policies may be doing serious harm by traumatizing and re-traumatizing young people, in particular young people of color (Emdin, 2016).

Given the context of exclusionary discipline practices and restrictive school rules, such as directives about how a student must have their hands as they walk down the hallway, it is not hard to see why some students feel powerless and controlled. Peter explained:

When you walk into a high school classroom, you lose your rights. That's the honest truth. You lose your first amendment, your second amendment, your third amendment, your fourth—like all of it just everything just you lose them and you're like, "Okay, well now I'm a peasant." That's really what the education systems feels like now is like I'm a peasant and I have to listen to what they're saying even though I know it's not going to help me in the future, even though I know that I'll never use this, I still have to listen to it. That's how they teach you.

They teach you to listen and conform. (Peter, Interview 3, April 27, 2017).

Stovall (2017) argued that there is a difference between schooling, which teaches order and compliance, and education, which teaches critical thinking and how to take action against the status quo of the education system. Hence, young people, like Peter, are frustrated that their educational experience is limited to schooling and focused on compliance and control. They desire an education, which allows them the freedom to question, be critical of, and challenge the current social and political systems and structures.

Students asserted that their frustrations with the restrictive and controlling school environment together with feeling unsafe and devalued in school caused them to feel angry and in some cases act out violently. Manny described the process of how the "cruelty" of the school environment contributed to his feelings of anger and led him to fighting:

It leads to not wanting to go to class cuz you're like, "I'm already failing so why be in class?" And then it's like why even be in school if I'm not going to class.

Oh shit. Now I'm behind. And you get in trouble for not being in school and you're forced to stay in school. Then you don't know what the hell is going on in class and you try to focus then you just get frustrated and it goes down hill. Fights, angry, storming out. And some of the reasons you don't even know why you're mad or you don't feel like yourself. Regular high school is like drowning, it's like beating almost. It's cruel. (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017)

Not fully understanding the reasons behind the anger and acting out in ways that felt out of character was a repeated theme in other student participants' stories. For example, Martin explained that in school:

I mean I was an asshole. I mean if you walked towards me, I wouldn't move. I'd just walk towards you or we'd get into a fight basically. Yeah, I didn't like that I was an asshole, I mean cuz I'm not an asshole, I'm like chill as fuck. I always try to be nice to people. I try to be nice. But they just push me because they're so ignorant and stupid. The people just think they're all that like, "I'm cooler than you cuz I have money." They'll fuck you up like bump into me. Just a lot of people. (Martin, Interview 3, April 27, 2017)

In a later interview he explained how the school environment affected how he acted in school, including why he was getting into fights:

I felt weird inside of high school. So, I'd have panic attacks just out of nowhere. I don't know why. Cuz sometimes my high school was like one hallway was like so crowded like everyone just bumping into each other and I'd like freak out. I'd just like start pushing people out of the way. Like "Get the fuck out of my way." It's

too crowded. Like I can't do this. And I'd just get into fights. (Martin, Interview 5, May 5, 2017)

Olivia also experienced panic and claustrophobia in the hallways, which led to her feelings of irritation and anger. Eventually those feelings were untenable and she felt she had to leave the school. She stated:

And when it's a lot of people, my patience gets short. Not that I dislike people, it just does. I feel kinda claustrophobic. And then that's when I start to feel some type of rush and that's when, I get irritated. When the rush comes because I'm like, "Why do I feel like this, I shouldn't be feeling like this?" Because all these people are here. It's just a lot to deal with. I couldn't take it, that's the reason why it didn't last long and I knew it wasn't going to last long. (Olivia, Interview 2, April 20, 2017)

For students of color, such as Manny, Martin, and Olivia, these feelings of fear, anger, and powerlessness may be related to postracial tension stress disorder. Postracial tension stress disorder refers to:

Youth seeing themselves as powerless in a world that conveys to them the message that race doesn't matter, at the same time it subjects them to physical and symbolic violence (at the hands of police and schools) because of their race. (Emdin, 2016, p. 23)

Race does matter. Racial bias impacts the assumptions teachers make about students and how teachers connect and support students. Students of color, as well as students from other historically marginalized communities, are disproportionately impacted by the

pushout rate and harsh discipline and exclusionary policies. When schools fail to recognize how systemic racism and racial bias is impacting the lived experiences of students of color it does harm, with postracial tension disorder as one example.

In general, teachers may fail to recognize the trauma—bullying, harsh and racist school discipline policies, and a controlling and assimilationist school environment—that students are experiencing on a daily basis inside of schools. The fact that the trauma students are experiencing inside and outside of school is not being recognized, is its own trauma. Students feel personal repression and resulting trauma when they “are expected to leave their day-to-day experiences and emotions at the door and assimilate to the culture of schools” (Emdin, 2016, p. 23). This personal repression is not healthy for young people. Irisa, one of the YCRs, wrote: “One thing my school taught me was to surpress [*sic*], so hiding your emotions and just putting school first” (Irisa Ramiz, Researcher notebook, no date). Later in an interview she described the pain this personal repression in school caused her:

I did fight her [another student], but that was all out of all this anger I had. And at the time, kinda to bring it back in, it's just like, you know, I started cutting myself like going through all this shit. I was just going through a lot of depression and stuff then. But I felt like I was just going down in this tunnel like in a dream like I couldn't—I feel like I was going around in circles and circles cuz I just wasn't doing good predominantly. And I knew that in the back of my head, it's just I never really... Yeah, I never faced it. I never brung it up cuz I was just too scared to think I wasn't going to graduate. I was like—and people told me, my teachers

would tell me, "You know you're a failure. You're not going to graduate. You're not going to make it." (Irisa, Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

Irisa was not the only student to disclose that they were engaging in self-harming behaviors while attending their previous schools. The mainstream schools that students described and their experiences in those schools were in direct contrast to the assertion that "the primary responsibility of a teacher is to be a healer" (Duncan-Andrade, personal communication, September 27, 2017). As Maria advised teachers in our presentation: be who young people need. Schools should be places of healing, not trauma and anxiety. Student participants described BAS as a family, a supportive, caring environment. When students feel unsafe, fearful, disrespected, powerless, and dehumanized at their schools, it is no wonder that they view leaving their school as a success. The next section will explore the fourth and final co-constructed theme, "Dropping out was [actually] a success."

"Dropping out was [actually] a success." This phrase came from a student participant during his first group interview and he repeated it during the following interview. The idea that "dropping out *was* [actually] a success" stood out to the YCRs and myself and so we created a question to ask the other student participants what they thought about the idea during the third group interviews. Although not all of student participants agreed, the majority of the student participants shared their own definition of what "dropping out was [actually] a success" meant to them. Many of them felt leaving school was a success because of the harmful experiences described in the previous section had become untenable and unhealthy. Similarly, because of school-based

traumatic experiences, Schwartz (2013) asserted that for many of the student participants in her study “leaving school was probably a smart decision” (p. 111). This section will highlight: (1) how student participants defined “dropping out was [actually] a success,” (2) what they shared was positive about taking a break from school, and (3) what terms students participants preferred to use to describe themselves, instead of dropout.

Martin was the first student participant to connect his definition of success to his decision to leave school. Martin explained:

I mean that's what success is: just doing what you need to do. And just try to get it done. When I dropped out of school, it's just I felt that was kind of a success because I hated school and I didn't like being there. And I didn't feel like school was for me. So, then I dropped out cuz I wanted to box. So, I did that. So, that's my definition of success: doing what you need to do...I got kicked out and didn't go back. I was happy honestly when I got kicked out and dropped out. (Martin, Interview 3, April 27, 2017)

It is from his words here that the YCRs and I coined the phrase “dropping out was [actually] a success.” In his next interview, he went on to say, “I mean I feel society calls it dropout, but I just feel like I was saved basically in my opinion. Because I'd lose my shit if I was still there” (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017). In other words, leaving school saved him from an unhealthy situation and doing further harm to himself. Ricky also connected their definition of success to being “kicked out of school.” They also stated:

I sort of feel like I succeeded by getting kicked out of school. But at the same time I didn't cuz in reality they kicked me out because of my anxiety. But I also skipped school and everything, so at that point I just wanted to be out of school anyway. And I knew that my [grandmother] wouldn't let me quit school anyway. And I also made a promise to my mom that I wouldn't quit school, so if I got kicked out then it would be better. So, I felt like I succeeded in what I wanted. To succeed at something, you get it done. (Ricky, Interview 3, April 27, 2017).

Ricky felt that they could not just leave school, they had to get kicked out, so by missing enough days of school, they were un-enrolled from their school. In a later interview, Ricky described in more detail why it was positive that they were no longer in school:

I was happy to be out of school. But I feel like it's a good thing that I got out cuz I was sick and tired of having anxiety attacks every day. I was sick and tired of just having all of these things. And I needed to give myself a break. (Ricky, Interview 4, May 4, 2017)

For Ricky attending their school meant suffering anxiety attacks, which were related to the bullying they had experienced throughout their time in school. Since the school was not supporting them in the way they needed, the only solution they saw was to get out of school and take a break. Feeling safe, comfortable, and supported is vital to the learning process. Similar to Ricky, Friday realized she was not going to do well in school until she found a place where she was comfortable. Friday explained:

With the last two places [i.e., schools] I went, [leaving school] was definitely a success. I didn't have a plan afterwards so that was not successful. But leaving

was definitely a great thing. Cuz you're not in the right space in your head or just around you and you're clearly not going to get as far as you want to or you could. So you're just taking a break and if it's too long of a break, you still go back and finish off what you want to do. And it's in a space and place where you feel 100% comfortable or at least 75% and clearly it will be better and you'll do better.

(Friday, Interview 8, June 1, 2018)

According to Friday, leaving school was a success because she did not settle for a learning environment where she was uncomfortable and where she would not do as well, instead she found BAS where she was supported, felt comfortable, and as a result did much better in school.

While the dominant dropout narrative may portray young people, who leave school, as lazy or unwilling to do the hard work in school, these counternarratives from student participants tell a totally different story. According to student participants, the decision to leave school is one of self-protection, self-advocacy, and a mature refusal to continue to suffer in their school situations despite the stigma of dropping out. It is not that these young people leave school because they do not want to learn, they leave school because they are not learning in their school and are instead being demoralized and suffering indignities. Here is how Manny described how his experience pushes back on the dominant dropout narrative:

People will think, "Oh you're a drop-out, you're like nothing. You're never getting further, you know." But the fact with me [is], I made it this far. I have like 17 credits. Came to school to BAS and I was like "Oh shit, I don't care that I

actually didn't make it through regular school." I'm glad I'm getting this opportunity to give it more time about my knowledge and my education and the system. It was a success. It made me open up more. It made me see more community. It made me go through way more experiences with other people and be able to branch out. I feel like I meet different people all the time. Yeah, it was a success because I'm still on my path of being able to get my GED and my diploma. I find myself intelligent. I may not have been able to deal with it in a classroom setting of where they held expectations of what they wanted me to be, but I damn sure can take a test, study something, and pass it and retain knowledge. (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017).

Manny is a highly capable and intelligent young man, who is learning more about the world and himself because he left school and found an alternative school where he could be successful. The fact that these young people are leaving school tells a much more critical story of how the school system is failing students, and says very little about these young people, not to mention their capability, intelligence, and ability to impact their communities.

Not all of the student participants agreed with the idea that "dropping out was [actually] a success." For some students, it was not until they found success in school at BAS, that they began to see their decision to leave as a positive one. Ame described:

For me, leaving school, I feel like it's both a failure, but also a success. So, I failed even though I was succeeding in school, I failed because I had personal issues going on. And I gave up on getting a high school diploma. But, I'm also succeeding because

I'm also finishing getting high school completion with a GED. (Ame, Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

For Ame being successful meant completing high school, so it was not until she found a school where she felt it was possible to complete high school that she felt successful.

Olivia also felt that dropping out was not success because to her it means giving up on school and completing high school entirely. She explained:

I don't think dropping out is a success at all. I'm not saying it's stupid, but that's kind of how I'm saying it a little bit. Because who wouldn't want to be successful? So for you to just drop out, it's like you're giving up everything and why do that if you want to be successful? That shouldn't be your goal. I understand some people do it, but I wouldn't look at it as an option. (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

Olivia did not see herself as a dropout. In her words, "Even though I was out of school. I still wouldn't consider myself as a dropout. I just took a break that's how I look at it" (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017). Similar to Ame, she saw herself as successful, and not a dropout, since she was doing well and making steps toward completing her GED at BAS. According to Olivia, "Because now, everything I didn't use to do [in previous schools], I do at [this] school. I'm seeing progress and it's good progress every single time" (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017). For some student participants simply leaving school to escape anxiety-filled and traumatic experiences made "dropping out [actually] a success" while for other students, it was not until they found a school that worked for them and were making progress toward completing high school that they felt successful.

For several of the student participants the break from their previous school before starting at BAS was an important time for them because it helped prepare them to return to school. Ame explained:

I think leaving school was helpful for me because I was able to take the year and a half off that I did to find who I am as a person and take my time that I needed. I figured out what I wanted to do with my life, what I wanted from life, how I wanted to achieve that goal that I set for myself, personal and educational. (Ame, Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

Like Ame, Olivia also found that during her break from school, she was able to figure out and set personal and educational goals and learn about herself. Additionally, Olivia was able to discover more about her own cultural background and the history of Black people in the United States, which she had not been taught in schools. Olivia described how:

It helps though—that little break that I had. It really did help because now I know what I'm looking for, now I know what I really want and I know how to get what I really wanted—the whole time! I wrote my goals down in a journal and then I was like, "This is what I need to do and this is how I'm going to get back in school. And this is what I'm going to do different." I was applying for jobs. I was trying to get into smaller schools that I feel would fit for me. I was taking my own GED tests and lessons online. I did all that by myself while I was out of school. I asked my auntie something every day. And then, I would spark the conversation. I had to find a way to teach myself. We'll go to the library and get books about, you know. Back then I wasn't [even] woke, now I'm conscious. So, you can't just

come at me and tell me just anything. You can't be like, "Oh, your people was this and this and that." Because I'm going to look it up. And I'm going to call around and I'm going to figure this out some type of way. Even if I've got to read a book, I'm going to figure it out. (Olivia, Interview 7, May 26, 2017)

As has been stated before, Ame and Olivia's words show that students want to learn.

Both Ame and Olivia took steps to teach themselves, to learn about themselves, and to set goals. Their words also give insight into the type of learning that many student participants were not getting at their previous schools. Hence, it took leaving school for Ame and Olivia to learn about themselves, learn about what they wanted to do in life, and to learn about their own cultural and personal histories.

Many student participants did not identify with the label dropout because they had all eventually returned to school. As Olivia put it:

You know honestly what I thought was a dropout? Someone who dropped out and just never came back to school. Like you just don't care. Like you're just not going to go to school ever again. So that's why I say I don't really consider myself as a dropout. (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

Since student participants largely did not identify as dropouts, the YCRs and I were curious about how they identified or defined themselves as learners. We asked them during the third group interviews. Xavier stated that while he used to feel like a dropout, now given his experience at BAS, he wanted to be thought of as successful. He stated:

For me, I kind of consider myself a dropout when I left school because there's a lot of pressure on me. You know, most of my friends graduated. And then I just

felt like I was a dropout. But...since I'm here [at BAS], I kind of feel like a success because I feel like I'm working toward my future other than just sitting home doing nothing. (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

We heard a similar feeling from both Ame and Olivia that because they were now working toward their future goals at BAS, they were not dropouts. Instead of dropout, Ame stated "*perseverance* might be [the term] I use because even though I dropped out sophomore year, I kept trying different alternatives" (Ame, Interview 2, April 20, 2017).

Martin identified with the term pushout. He explained:

I feel like that [the term pushout] applies to me. Like they push you away, where you feel like you have to go away because of certain individuals or a group or something like bullying in a way. That's the reason why I left cuz of the people. I couldn't stand it. It's just too much. (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017).

While Martin felt pushed out by people at his school, Ricky felt like their teachers just allowed them to drift away. They described feeling invisible to their teachers because no one intervened in their bullying or when they stopped doing their work or stopped going to school. Thus, Ricky identified with the phrase, "I ghosted out" (Ricky, Interview 8, June 1, 2017). Friday also described that she ghosted out of school, but in terms of how she identified as a learner, she wanted to simply be known and identified by her name. Finally, Manny wanted to be identified as an "empathetic learner." He explained what that meant to him:

But I'm not going to say you can't learn something from me. I'm an empathetic learner. We can learn something from everybody. You step into my perspective,

and let me sit down and tell you my story on how I see this. You don't have to believe in it, you don't have to take my view, you don't have to call it your own. Just listen. Step into perspective. Yes, I'm an empathetic learner. (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017)

The YCRs and I tried to embody this idea of being empathetic learners in order to learn from the student participants and meaningfully represent their stories. In our discussions with each other and with the student participants about the theme “dropping out was [actually] a success,” we learned that there are many different ways that student participants identify other than as a dropout. We also learned that students' decisions to leave school can be seen as a positive, healthy choice to escape intolerable situations at school, contrary to what the dominant dropout narrative might suggest. We learned that students want to learn and that by leaving school, even temporarily, they may learn more about themselves than they did in school. Finally, we learned that when students leave school, it says much more about what their mainstream schools are doing and not doing that is negatively impacting students, rather than about who these young people are and what they can do.

Summary of co-constructed themes. The YCRs and I worked together over several months to define and refine these four co-constructed themes: (1) “I felt invisible to the teachers,” (2) “Teaching is a sacred act,” (3) “Regular high school is like drowning, it's cruel,” and (4) “Dropping out was [actually] a success.” Throughout this discussion of these co-constructed themes, we have heard student participants describe how they struggled to connect with their teachers and build caring relationships together. We heard

that at times, racial bias and negative assumptions about students meant that student participants, in particular student participants of color, were not held to high expectations or were targeted and disciplined more harshly by teachers than their White peers. We learned that students often want their teachers to prioritize showing care for them over teaching the content. From the student participants' stories, we also heard that students learn in multiple ways and that they want teachers to recognize, validate, and teach to these multiple ways of learning and understanding. Student participants shared many experiences of anxiety and trauma in schools as reasons for why they felt angry, unsafe, powerless, fearful, and depressed. Additionally, research shows that students of color are disproportionately impacted by the pushout rate and harsh discipline and exclusionary policies (America's Promise Alliance, 2014; Redfield & Nance, 2016). And yet, schools often fail to recognize how systemic racism and racial bias affect the lived experiences of students of color and as a result do harm, specifically to young people of color (Emdin, 2016; Noguera, 2008). Hence, the YCRs and I were left wondering whether all traumatic school experiences are disproportionately impacting young people of color. Student participants described how they left their mainstream schools to escape the indignities and dehumanizing experiences they were having in school. Many student participants identified this decision to leave as successful because it was not healthy for them at the school where they were at or because they eventually found better educational options and a more comfortable environment at BAS. In fact, they felt they were better able to take care of themselves because the main stressor of school was gone.

Themes From the Outsider Perspective

As stated at the beginning of this chapter, the two themes in this section come from my own reflections and interpretations during the data analysis process of what was significant in what the student participants said. These themes come from my perspective as the outsider and adult researcher in the YPAR process and they are influenced by my particular lens as a White, middle class, academically successful woman. The goal of using YPAR as a decolonizing methodology (Smith, 2012) was to center the research on the insider perspective of the YCRs and student participants, what they found significant, and how they described what was significant in their own words. Hence, the themes discussed in this section should be given less weight and legitimacy than the co-constructed themes from the previous section because they come from my perspective as an outsider who does not share the same lived experience of leaving school as the student participants. While I have discussed these themes with the YCRs and our conversations influenced how I represent them, the YCRs did not choose to include these themes in our presentations. Thus, while these themes were not as significant to the YCRs from their insider perspective as the co-constructed themes, the YCRs have validated and given their insight into my outsider interpretations here.

Through YPAR methods and researching *with*, the YCRs and I have co-created a space in between the insider and outsider perspectives—what Fine (1994) called “working on the hyphen.” I have named the ways in which I hold power and privilege because of my identities and I have acknowledged my outsider voice in this study. However, I am also intimately connected to the context of the study as a long-time

teacher at BAS with strong, caring relationships with many of the students in the study. Hence, sharing these outsider themes, while placing them in the context of my lens as a White woman and my relationship to the YCRs and student participants, is part of working on the hyphen. The true value in sharing these themes from the outsider perspective may be in contrasting them to the co-constructed themes that the YCRs found most important. Noting these differences may lend insight into better understanding what is significant about changing the education system to young people who share the lived experiences of the participants as compared to what an outsider, adult researcher may deem significant. The two themes from the outsider perspective are: (1) leaving school is a traumatic experience and (2) resiliency.

Leaving school is traumatic. Despite the fact that multiple student participants agreed that leaving school was a success, many of those same student participants experienced depression, feelings of hopelessness, and anger even months after leaving school. There was also an undercurrent of self-blame in several of the student participants' stories. Thus, while student participants have a critique of how the education system has failed them, they have still internalized the dominant dropout narrative and believe that they could have done more to stay in school. Even though leaving school can be a healthy choice for students, it is still a traumatic event with lasting consequences for how students see themselves and their self-worth.

Once the initial relief and happiness of leaving their toxic school situations had passed, student participants found that they struggled emotionally, felt stuck, and were not satisfied with their situations. As Martin explained, "I was happy for a while. Then I

worked at Taco Bell and I didn't feel like that was successful for me because, you know, it's a dead-end job. I'm not trying to make minimum wage” (Martin, Interview 3, April 27, 2017). In her research, Fine (2018) found that while young people who had recently left school were full of hope and had strong structural critiques of school, over time these hopes faded and “their social critique metastasized to self-blame” (p. 14). A few months after leaving school, both Ricky and Friday described having symptoms of depression and feeling that they were not doing anything to make progress. Ricky stated:

Like half a year after I dropped out—got kicked out—I started feeling like crap. I felt like complete crap because I’m not doing anything at all besides hanging out with my girlfriend. That was it. I would hang out with my girlfriend, eat a tiny bit and then go to sleep. I fell into a horrible depression. Like worse than ever, worse than whenever I was getting [messages saying:] “kill yourself.” Because I wasn’t doing anything. So I felt like complete crap. (Ricky, Interview 4, May 4, 2017)

Similarly, Friday described how:

It was really good for the first few months. It was nice because I was immensely stressed [earlier]. And then I just got so bored that nothing was making me happy. I like didn’t even want to leave my house like go and hang out with [friends] or something. I didn’t want to do anything. And I like stopped eating for a while. I was just smoking cigarettes in my room and I was just like I want to die. Like I’m just so bored. (Friday, Interview 8, June 1, 2017)

For Friday, her feelings of boredom caused her to retreat and she stopped doing things she enjoyed, such as hanging out with friends. Ricky actually mentioned being depressed

and feeling worse than when they were in school because they were not doing anything. In contrast, for Olivia, the feeling that she wasn't doing anything made her angry. She explained:

I was mad at the world when I stopped going to school for a minute. I was like, "I just need some time to myself." And I think that's what I really did. Just took time to myself. Then, I was like, "Okay, it's been a year." I was mad. I used to break down a lot because I'm not used to that and for me to just take myself to that point is just crazy. But I used to be mad at the world. I used to just like, "Fuck it. Everything. Whatever." But then, I look at some people and be like, "I don't want to be like you, so I'm finna [fixing] to get to it." I felt I wasn't doing nothing.

(Olivia, Interview 2, April 20, 2017)

The anger that she had when she left school did not go away, it just became anger at the world and herself because she was not doing anything, in her opinion. In the previous section, we heard what Olivia did between leaving school and starting BAS—writing in a journal, setting goals, working, learning on her own, and looking for a better school. She was doing something—restructuring her life—even though she may not have seen it as making significant progress toward completing high school. She appeared to be blaming herself for not doing enough and for being too much like people whom she did not see as successful. While these thoughts helped motivate her to go back to school, she was hard on herself for doing nothing even though she was doing things to prepare to go back to school eventually.

One of the student participants, Peter, began to question and doubt himself after leaving school, so much so that he wondered about his own mental health. He described how:

I kept thinking to myself everyday like, “Man, what’d I do with my life? Where am I going to go? You know, I’m almost 18 this is not happening right now.” And I felt like so just doubting myself so much and I thought I was literally just mentally ill. (Peter, Interview 3, April 27, 2017)

It was not until after he started going to BAS that he was able to see himself and his own intellectual capabilities more clearly. After some time at BAS, Peter acknowledged “now I see myself as a lot more intellectual than I thought I was” (Peter, Interview 3, April 27, 2017). His previous experiences at school and his self-doubt after leaving school left him feeling unintelligent, irresponsible, and mentally ill. After doing well at BAS, he realized that he was intelligent and capable. The dominant dropout narrative promotes the story that young people who leave school are irresponsible, less capable, less intelligent, and lazy. After leaving school, student participants described feeling that they were not doing enough, that they doubted themselves, and that they were questioning their intelligence and mental health. Hence, some student participants had internalized the dominant dropout narrative and began blaming themselves, instead of critiquing the school system, for having not yet completed high school.

Even for students with some of the strongest structural criticisms of the education system, their stories had an undercurrent of self-blame and a suggestion of doubt as to whether they deserved to be happy until they completed high school. When speaking

about the school system and poor teaching, Xavier asserted “leaving kids alone when they struggle is part of the system and letting kids fail is part of what they do” (Xavier, Interview 9, June 5, 2017). He strongly placed blame on the education system for letting students fail to complete high school. Yet, when he was asked in the same interview what he would change about his previous high school experiences, he focused on what he would have done differently, not what the school needed to change. He stated:

But, personally just talking about the past experiences that I had at different high schools and whatnot, it just feels like things that kind of stand out was that I wasted a lot of time just that I could have just make a difference. It showed that how many times that I kinda wasted. I feel like I could have just—well, it doesn't make a difference just talking about it, regretting anything, but I feel like I could have pushed myself a little harder, you know. (Xavier, Interview 9, June 5, 2017)

Xavier's words here are an interesting contrast to his story of how hard he tried again and again to pass the standardized tests to graduate, how he reached out to teachers for support who often dismissed him and pushed him into easier classes, and how he was working hard to understand and learn the U.S. school culture. It is hard to imagine that Xavier could have pushed himself harder, especially when according to him, he received such little support from school staff. Students convert the messages of the dominant dropout narrative “into an internalized and unrealistic belief in personal responsibility, which colludes with a larger social ideology about ‘their’ fault” (Fine, Burns, Payne, & Torre, 2004/2018, p. 41). Hence, because the dominant dropout narrative suggests that students who leave school did not work hard enough to stay in school, Xavier has

internalized this narrative and blames himself for not doing more and not working harder to stay in school. Xavier's own narrative pushes back on the dominant dropout narrative to show that young people who leave school do, in fact, work very hard to try to stay in school and that it is the system that does not support them with what they need. And yet, because the dominant dropout narrative is so deeply imbedded in our culture as a part of social ideology, Xavier, for example, has internalized unfounded feelings of self-blame. Additionally, these feelings may continue to affect him even after he completes high school.

In addition to self-blame, underneath student participants' personal narratives was a suggestion that they did not deserve to be fully happy unless they completed high school. Student participants described how they were highly motivated to work hard to complete high school and go to college or start a career. However, are these statements from the student participants just the false promises of the myth of meritocracy reproduced in their words? The myth of meritocracy debunks the idea that success in school is "just a matter of motivation, grit, and hard work" (Anderson, 2017, para. 7). On the contrary, systemic inequities exist in schools that marginalize and oppress certain young people because of their race, socio-economic status, and other identities. Nevertheless, student participants, such as Olivia, repeated a belief in the myth of meritocracy in their interviews. For example, Olivia explained:

I can't expect anything to be easy and that's what makes it better because you did all this hard work to pay off, to be successful. It's going to pay off for a lifetime, instead of just getting a regular job somewhere, and you're halfway happy. So

dropping out isn't a choice because I want to go to school, to get this hardworking job. I want to be happy in the end. And for me to have a comfortable lifestyle.

(Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

Not only does Olivia believe that the playing field is equal and that with hard work comes success, she also believes that she does not deserve to be fully happy until she does work hard to earn her success and comfortable lifestyle. “But for those marginalized by the system—economically, racially, and ethnically—believing the system is fair puts them in conflict with themselves and can have negative consequences” (Anderson, 2017, para. 5). Young people who believe the myth of meritocracy are more likely to internalize stereotypes, blame themselves, and have a lower self-esteem and sense of worth (Anderson, 2017). The reality is as an African-American young woman, Olivia will face discrimination and systemic racism, and will have to work harder than her White peers to achieve her goals. Yet by believing that the system is fair, she may internalize her setbacks and blame herself for not working hard enough to meet her goals. In other words, she may believe that there is something wrong with her, instead of the system that is marginalizing, oppressing, and inequitable. Hence, while leaving school may be a healthy, positive choice, it is still a traumatic event that leaves young people with wounds that need healing. Young people who leave school, particularly youth from historically marginalized communities, may have internalized blame, negative stereotypes of self, and a low sense of self that they will need support in processing and healing from at their next school and throughout their lives. When the school system fails students and pushes them to leave school, the school system is doing harm to young people. It is disturbing

how much pain and suffering young people are put through in schools and how those wounds have long-term impacts on their belief in themselves. And yet, these young people show an incredible amount of resiliency by returning to school. The next theme will discuss student participants' "resiliency."

Resiliency. Resiliency refers to the "capacity to recover from adversity" (America's Promise Alliance, 2014). Student participants in this study have demonstrated resilience by returning to school at BAS after experiencing toxic and traumatic situations at their previous schools. For example, Ricky experienced intensive bullying from both students and teachers, which caused them to associate bullying with school. As they said, "I was just terrified it [i.e., the bullying] was going to come back because I expected it" (Ricky, Interview 4, May 4, 2017). Nevertheless, Ricky showed courage in giving school another chance to pursue their education at BAS. In general, this chapter has highlighted many of the struggles and adversities that student participants and YCRs have gone through. This section will focus on the strengths, such as Ricky's courage, that student participants and YCRs have shown, which I am calling their "resiliency."

A study from America's Promise Alliance (2014) found that young people who stop going to school show resiliency through their persistence, personal agency, courage, and optimism in their everyday lives and in their decision to return to school. In their survey of nearly 2,000 young people who left high school for at least a semester, they found that 85% of them "reported that they were able to solve problems, had a five year goal that they wanted to achieve, and that they have learned from their pasts" (America's Promise Alliance, 2014, p. 34). Thus, the majority of these young people expressed a

sense of agency, were goal-oriented with an immediate goal being completing high school, and were optimistic what they could achieve their goals. Similarly, the student participants and YCRs have shown these same strengths in this study. Ame showed incredible persistence because she never gave up on finding a school that would work for her. After leaving school during her sophomore year, Ame tried at least three different schools, including an online school, returning to her previous mainstream school, and homeschooling, before eventually coming to BAS almost two years later. As shared earlier, the term that Ame would like used to describe herself as a learner is “perseverance.” In her words, “Perseverance might be [the term] I use because even though I dropped out sophomore year, I kept trying different alternatives” (Ame, Interview 2, April 20, 2017). Ame refused to continue to attend schools where she was being bullied and harassed, yet she continued trying alternatives until she found a school where she was treated with respect and was able to make academic progress.

It takes courage to try school again after being mistreated and miseducated at previous schools. As Martin put it, “I came here [to BAS] and I fucking love school now. I didn't think I would say those words (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017). Martin did not think it was possible to find a school where he would love learning, but that did not stop him from taking the leap of faith to try BAS. In fact, Martin literally enrolled at BAS on a dare from his friend who was also planning to attend school there. Martin showed courage in accepting that dare and starting school again.

A strong sense of personal agency and a belief in herself that she could return to school and be successful informed Olivia's resilient decision to return to school at BAS. As she explained:

Failing is not an option. I tell myself that all the time. It's not an option. If I have to try it 10 times, I'm going to try those 10 times until I get it because failing is not an option. I can't let myself down. (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

She describes how she is going to continue to try until she gets it, which speaks not only to her persistence, but also the belief in herself that she can and will eventually succeed. As Olivia stated "I'm willing to do whatever it takes and however long it takes to do what I got to do, to be what I want to be" (Olivia, Interview 7, May 26, 2017). According to her, she has the agency and will take the actions necessary to find success at a school and achieve her goals. She is not a victim nor helpless or hopeless despite multiple setbacks in her education mostly due to toxic school experiences.

In addition to showing personal agency, many of the student participants shared a sense of optimism about their futures. This optimism often came from having a sense of direction and goals to guide them toward a future that felt possible and exciting. Xavier explained:

I feel like I can continue my future and I feel like a lot of opportunity that I can see, things I could do. It's like a pathway that looks so clear. I feel like I have goals like you know and those goals kind of push me. (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017)

Xavier's comment exemplifies what other student participants also stated. Sometimes this optimism existed for students before they came to BAS, while for others they developed it at BAS once they felt supported, valued, and saw their own progress toward their goals at the school. Given the indignities, traumatic experiences, disrespect, discrimination, dismissal, and marginalization the student participants and YCRs felt at their previous schools, it is hard to believe that they could continue to be optimistic. And yet, the optimism is there in many of their stories and is one of the ways the student participants showed their resiliency.

Summary of themes from the outsider perspective. The two themes "leaving school is traumatic" and "resiliency," show that we cannot underestimate the harm that leaving school does to students even when it is a healthy decision to leave; nor can we underestimate the resiliency of young people who leave school and return to an alternative school. Several student participants described feeling depressed, angry, and stuck months after leaving school. Other student participants had an undercurrent of self-blame in their counternarratives, showing that students who leave school can internalize the dominant dropout narrative and a belief that they could have done more to stay in school. Given what the student participants have described in their counternarratives, this feeling of responsibility and fault seems unrealistic and unfounded. In addition to the dominant dropout narrative, the myth of meritocracy also impacts how the student participants described their self-worth and potential for future happiness. Some student participants, believing that with hard work everyone will experience success equally, began to feel that something was wrong with them for not completing high school,

instead of blaming inequities in the school system. Youth from historically marginalized communities who leave school are particularly vulnerable to developing internalized blame, stereotypes, and a low sense of self from the dominant dropout narrative and myth of meritocracy. Hence, leaving school is traumatic and can have long-lasting impacts on how students see themselves and their self-worth.

In their counternarratives, the student participants showed resilience and determination in returning to school at BAS to formally complete their high school education. They demonstrated persistence, courage, personal agency, and optimism to return to their education after experiencing mistreatment, discrimination, disrespect, and pain at their previous public schools. A couple of student participants described how they would not give up and would continue trying until they completed high school. While this “resiliency” and resolve is admirable, it also speaks to the pressure that young people feel, because of societal pressure and the dominant dropout narrative, to complete high school. The stigma of not completing high school affects young people. Olivia described someone who did not finish high school as “halfway happy” (Olivia, Interview 6, May 22, 2017). To be fully happy and live a comfortable lifestyle, Olivia believed that she needed to complete high school. Unfortunately, depending on a student’s situation, there may be limited ways in which they can complete high school and it is possible that these other pathways may just reproduce the same education traumas as students, particularly students of color, experienced in their previous schools. In Chapter 5, I will discuss the need for more pathways for students to complete high school and/or ways for students to achieve their goals without high school completion. The next section of this chapter will

discuss how the YCRs described the impacts of the YPAR experience on themselves and their views of the education system.

Youth Co-Researchers' Experiences Doing Youth Participatory Action Research

As stated previously, the third research question asks: How do participating students in the role of youth co-researchers report their experiences of investigating their peers' perceptions of the education system that did not serve them? Hence, part of the purpose of this research project was to explore the impact of doing YPAR on the YCRs themselves in their own words. The YCRs described their experiences doing YPAR in largely positive ways. While they acknowledged that it was emotionally difficult to hear what the student participants had gone through in school, they felt that their involvement as young people in the research process was important and that the research had made a personal impact on how they saw themselves. Both Bee and Sk8 wrote in their researcher notebooks that they felt different as a result of their involvement as YCRs in the research. Bee reflected:

In the beginning of the project, I was very nervous about having to speak to people and make connections. Now I'm excited. Part of me is still anxious, but it's positive. Humbling even. I expected us...well, to be honest, I didn't know what to expect. I was surprised to be having so much fun. I feel different. I feel like my experiences and opinions matter and can help change the education experiences for the better. (Bee Beltran, researcher notebook, May 1, 2017)

Similarly, Sk8 wrote that the research process "wasn't what I expected. The surprises was how far we have gotten. I feel different. I feel more engaged" (Sk8 Nash, researcher

notebook, May 1, 2017). Most of the YCRs wanted to join the research project as co-researchers because they wanted to make a difference in the school system to make it better for future young people. As Lulis asserted, “My goal is to make an impact” (Lulis Lares Benitez, researcher notebook, March 28, 2017). However, many of the YCRs were surprised by how much the research impacted them personally and influenced how they saw themselves.

I interviewed five of the YCRs, Bee, Irisa, Lulis, Maria, and Sk8 about their experiences being a part of this research project. Sk8 summed up his experience by saying, “It was exciting. Because of the work we had to do and the speeches we had to make” (Sk8, Interview 11, June 13, 2017). Maria agreed with Sk8 that it was exciting and added that it was important that the research had young people, like themselves, involved in it. Maria described how:

It was interesting. It was exciting. It was a bit emotional. But overall, I really liked it...getting to hear people’s stories and knowing that people went through really tough, tough things when they were in high school and just the fact that they came to [BAS] and they say that [BAS] changed them. I feel like we’re doing something really good. I think that the research is really important. And it’s important that there’s kids that are involved that it wasn’t just adults. Because kids have more insights than the teachers do. Teachers are in a different generation and they have their own views when they were in high school. And they think that students nowadays went through the same thing, but that’s not how it happens, that’s not how it goes. (Maria, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

Maria's comment supports the purpose of this YPAR study, which centers on the perspectives of the young people who have been most affected by the issue of school pushout, in order to research alongside them and produce findings that more accurately reflect what they believe needs to change about the education system. Bee agreed with Maria about the importance of having young people involved as researchers because it built trust between the YCRs and student participants. She stated:

One thing that was really helpful about the experience was being with other students not just with other adults, or only just a couple students. Basically, it was student based and we were in charge. And it was really cool to actually have something that—you're really productive, you're [a] part of something and it feels good and it was really awesome to talk to students and have them trust us because they realized really soon that we had been through a lot of the same stuff and we had, you know, had a lot of the same situations in schools and it was just good.

(Bee, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

Bee described how good it felt to be a part of something and have leadership over a project that was working in solidarity with her peers.

The fact that the YCRs had been through some of the same experiences as the student participants meant that they could more readily show empathy for the experiences their peers were sharing with them in the interviews. Both Lulis and Irisa spoke about how their ability to relate to the student participants' stories helped the student participants open up and also made the research project more meaningful and impactful to them as YCRs. Lulis described how:

For me it was really eye opening because everybody shared their stories and they were [all] really vulnerable and they really opened up to us. And I think that was because we were young, we were the same age basically. And it was great because like we could relate and like maybe not exactly but we really understood each other. It was really great. (Lulis, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

The empathy developed between the student participants and YCRs did not just affect the student participants' willingness to be vulnerable and share their stories, it also was reassuring to the YCRs to know that they were not alone in their experiences. As Irisa said:

I really like co-researching. And I think this experience has definitely changed my life, just getting to experience like students and their stories. Knowing that we're all like the same or at least have like similar stories. Yeah, co-researching was fun. (Irisa, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

It was important that both during the interviews and when debriefing them, the YCRs also shared and processed their own experiences in previous schools. However, contrary to what Irisa said, co-researching was not always fun because hearing the student participants' stories and being reminded of their own experiences was emotionally difficult.

This research project brought up memories and feelings about the painful experiences the YCRs went through at their previous schools. As Shania described, "some of the stories brought up some bad memories of school and feelings of sadness and hurt. Also, it made me realize that there are still problems in the system" (Shania Diaz,

researcher notebook, May 22, 2017). It was discouraging for the YCRs to hear that some of the same experiences they had been through were still happening to young people. Additionally, since the YCRs were empathetic to the student participants' experiences and the YCRs cared about them, hearing their stories became that much more difficult.

Maria reflected:

When I was in those two first interviews I felt terrible because those people are such amazing people and have beautiful strong voices that are truly getting heard [in this research]. It's sad and upsetting that other schools didn't want them or hear them. (Maria Chitala, researcher notebook, May 29, 2017)

Some of the YCRs, such as Lulis, had tried to leave their traumatic school experiences in the past, but listening to the student participants' experiences in the interviews, made it necessary for her and other YCRs to process these painful school experiences together.

Lulis stated:

I didn't really want to talk about it [painful school experiences] either because I just wanted to leave that where it was in the past. But with this [research project] it brought [up] like a lot of stuff that I had forgotten or didn't [want to] remember. Yeah but I'm glad I did it with you guys [the YCRs] because then I could get healthy when these things did come up. (Lulis, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

Later on in the interview, Lulis added:

I remember I was like at home trying to take notes for the interview and I couldn't even listen to it. It was not even one minute. Everything just came up again. I was like, "Ahhh." But when I was actually like doing the interviews, like for me it's

easy not to be emotional when there's other people. Because I just hate people seeing me cry. So I was fine then. But after, I was—like I said doing it with you guys [the YCRs], it helped a lot because you guys were experiencing the same thing too. The same emotions and stuff. (Lulis, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

As described in a previous section in this chapter, the YCRs and I would often take time after the interviews and during our meetings to discuss the feelings that the research was bringing up for them. We all tried to support each other as we each needed. At times, this meant stopping the work that we had planned to do to talk through what we were going through or to take some needed space and time away from the research. Irisa was the initial YCR to open up and share about how what she was hearing in the interviews was bringing up painful emotions for her. She said, “I feel like it was good for me at least in the moment because then I got it off my chest and you guys [the YCRs] made me feel better” (Irisa, Interview 11, June 13, 2017). Her willingness to be vulnerable and share her emotion helped the other YCRs share their feelings. For example, Lulis asserted, “When Irisa shared, she gave me the courage to share” (Lulis Lares Benitez, personal communication, January 11, 2018). Bee also appreciated Irisa for helping start the conversation about how the interviews were making the YCRs feel. Bee stated, “It helped bond us together you know and understand where you're coming from and even through that your understanding of where we're coming from in a way” (Bee, Interview 11, June 13, 2017). According to Bee, Irisa, and Lulis, while it was difficult to relive the painful memories of their own past school experiences through the research process, the times

when the YCRs and I would discuss how we were feeling during the research process, we were healing and bonding more deeply.

Many of the YCRs mentioned that the research process had a surprising personal impact and changed the way that they saw and thought about themselves. As stated earlier, Irisa believed that being involved in this research project changed her life. She went on to say:

I feel like if I wouldn't have been co-researching and I [hadn't] come to you guys with my problems and stuff...I feel like I could have stopped a long time ago. I could have stopped being here at [BAS]. I feel like you guys [the YCRs] keep me motivated to keep coming here...You guys are awesome. (Irisa, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

According to Irisa, her participation as a YCR actually motivated her to continue coming regularly to BAS because of her bond with the other YCRs and also because co-researching gave her a place to share what she was going through inside and outside of school with people she trusted and who cared about her. Maria also felt that she was motivated to continue to come to school because of her commitment to the research project and to the other YCRs. Later in the interview, Irisa shared how she feels she changed during the time of the research:

I'm definitely a little bit [different] only because I feel like you guys [YCRs and BAS staff] are like pushing me to believe that you are worth something—telling me, "Don't talk bad about yourself." But like, I don't know. I just feel this definitely has changed me. I do look out for myself a lot differently, but I do feel

like this is making me...I really want to be myself. I think with starting here like being able to change my name even within here, like going inside of a whole school and changing my name. I feel pretty good about it. Like I always wanted people to call me by my real name but for a long time I felt just really...I was hurt about my name and stuff, certain stuff like a long time ago so now that I feel free enough to be like, call me by my real name. (Irisa, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

When Irisa first started BAS she went by a nickname and would talk to the YCRs and myself about pressure she felt to act bubbly, happy, and high energy when that was not always how she felt or who she was entirely. As part of the team building process of co-researching, we talked about our names, if there was a story about our names, and what they meant to us. At that time, Irisa decided to go by Irisa in the co-researching meetings, instead of the nickname. Soon after, she asked the YCRs, myself, and a couple other BAS staff to help let people know and support her wish for everyone to call her Irisa at school. As Irisa stated, it was an indication of changes she was making in terms of how she takes care of herself, believes in herself, and sees herself.

Bee also described how being a part of the research process as a YCR helped her to recognize that she was blaming herself for leaving school and to appreciate herself more for returning and doing well at BAS. Bee stated, "I have a lot of self-doubts and stuff but I don't necessarily give myself the praise that I deserve. But it's different being here [at BAS]" (Bee, Interview 11, June 13, 2017). In fact, it was hearing the student participant, Martin, describe how he believed that "dropping out was [actually] a success" that helped her see her own journey of leaving school in a different way. Bee reflected:

When Martin said that dropping out was a success that was a powerful statement and I don't know, it was a different way of thinking than I was used to because I was told for so long that dropping out and getting a GED was something bad. It made you lesser. And it was just really great to hear something different. Yeah, I never thought about it that way. That just really helped. (Bee, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

In the interview, Bee went on to describe how she has learned to appreciate and give herself more credit for what she has done:

I think being in this group and doing this research has helped me with reflecting and whatnot. Because it's helped me actually appreciate what I have done and my struggles and how far I've gotten. I mean I guess I wasn't that great educationally-wise because I was put down in school and I wasn't given the help I needed. But I see that like I'm actually getting help and whatnot here and it feels good to actually be doing good in school...It's given me time to appreciate what I've been through and how I got here.

(Bee, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

Bee was able to confront some of the internalized feelings of self-blame and low self-worth, which can be instilled in students through the painful and traumatic experiences described earlier in this chapter and perpetuated by the dominant dropout narrative. This does not mean that those feelings were resolved or erased. Through the YPAR research process, the YCRs, student participants, and myself co-created a space for some of these young people to see their negative school experiences differently, to question the

dominant dropout narrative that largely blames the students for not working hard enough to stay in school, and to begin to heal from some of their educational wounds through the support of their peers.

These educational wounds were and are still very raw for the YCRs and student participants. Healing does not mean that these wounds will ever go away. However, for Lulis it was easier to face the wounds and experiences that she had buried when she was with the other YCRs, whom she trusted and had been through similar experiences. Lulis reflected:

For me, it was mostly like just acceptance like accepting that [it] did happen but there's nothing like that I can change about it now. But then like moving forward to actually do something so other students won't experience the same thing. So yeah, for me it's all about the acceptance...what happened in high school, I just like buried it, you know, I didn't think about it, like it was nothing, but then it came up again. And I feel like if I didn't do this research, it would have come up another way and I wouldn't be like with other people...I would have lost my shit, you know. So, yeah, I think it definitely will help me in the future for like accepting things. And also like I'm just like really grateful that we're all here and that at [BAS] all these students are here. (Lulis, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

For Lulis, part of the process of acceptance was moving forward and taking action to prevent the same things from happening to other young people. For her, taking action—an essential part of the YPAR process—is what helped her process her own school experiences. Lulis attended every single presentation that we made, spoke out against

teaching practices and school policies that do harm, and took action in solidarity with future and current students like her.

For Irisa, Lulis, Maria, and Sk8, the YCRs who were able to be a part of the presentations in the summer and fall of 2017, those were some of their most powerful experiences of the entire YPAR process. Even before we presented, Maria described why it was important to take action on behalf of the student participants and do something with our research findings. She asserted:

The fact that we're going to go present [our work] to future teachers, I feel like that's really good. It should happen for every person who wants to be a teacher is to talk to students and see what they're going through and what they need and what they don't need from teachers. Like I don't know. I guess, to me it's like we did something big like we're doing something about it other than it just staying at [BAS]. (Maria, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

The YCRs felt responsible to carry forward the stories, voices, and experiences of the student participants and to speak those truths to teachers and administrators with the power to make changes to their practices and policies in their classrooms and schools. Lulis described to me in a conversation we had following our presentations in the fall about how she felt presenting:

It was really great. It was the first time I really felt my voice was heard. It was crazy. One thing I was worried about was not representing my classmates' voices. I wanted to make sure their voices were heard because they were [equally]

vulnerable in sharing with us. Now, I had to represent their stories. (Lulis Lares Benitez, personal communication, January 11, 2018)

When I asked Lulis how she knew that her voice was being heard at the presentations, she said:

Seeing them take notes, taking pictures, everybody asking really good freaking questions. And I was like, “Yes!” That’s how I knew that we were being heard. I also got to talk to people individually and got to know them at the Teaching with Purpose conference. One lady dealt with kids with disabilities and didn’t feel supported. I gave her our card and circled “You are supported” on the back, like saying “I got you!” (Lulis Lares Benitez, personal communication, January 11, 2018)

In Figure 4 below is a picture of the “business” card that the YCRs and I designed and created to share our contact information at the presentations. It was important to the YCRs that teachers felt supported to make changes in their classrooms and that they knew the YCRs were there to continue to offer advice and feedback to them from a student perspective. Being able to interact directly with the people that attended the

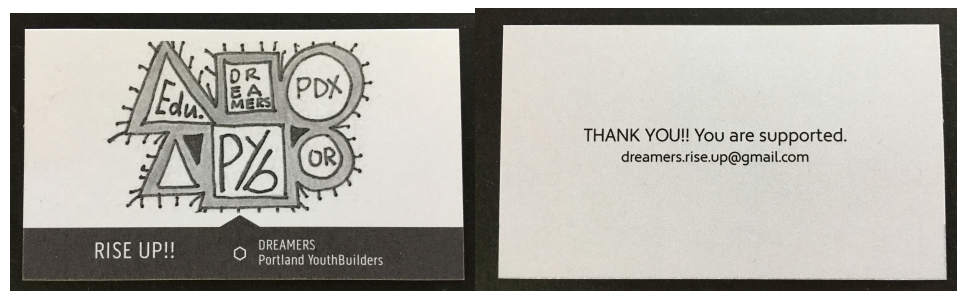


Figure 4. Our card with contact information, front and back.

presentations and hearing from them about what ideas they were taking away helped the YCRs feel that they were being heard. Irisa also noted “at the Seattle conference, it felt like we had so many other people on board. People interacted with us and they were taking notes” (Irisa Ramiz, personal communication, January 11, 2018). At one of the presentations, Sk8 asked a few of the people who attended what ideas they were bringing back to their classrooms and schools from our presentation. He recorded these ideas on index cards and shared them with us, so that we could talk about whether our recommendations were getting through to the teachers. His list of ideas included: schools create trauma, students feel teachers do not care, the curriculum does not represent students’ lives, schools give out unnecessary punishment, and teachers need to focus on building strong relationships with students. While he was pleased that the people who attended had heard the key ideas of our presentation, he was disappointed that the right people were not there to hear it. He described his concern that “the people that’s really doing things to make it better...was there. But the ones who really need to hear it...the ones the message was directly for weren’t [there at the presentation]” (Sk8 Nash, Interview 11, June 13, 2017). The YCRs and I shared this concern that perhaps our message was not getting to those teachers and administrators who needed to hear it most; however, we also acknowledged that the teachers and administrators who attended our presentations were perhaps more open to our ideas and advice, and hence more likely to actually make changes in their classrooms and schools.

In terms of making change, or, the charge of bringing sustainable changes in schools, the presentation that was the most nerve-wracking, but also the most powerful

for the YCRs was the presentation we made to staff and students at BAS. Irisa described how this presentation was “scary because it was people we knew and there were students there too. I’m glad they [the students] were there because they supported us” (Irisa Ramiz, personal communication, January 11, 2017). Similarly, Lulis said, “I was nervous for all the presentations, especially the one at [BAS]” (Lulis Lares Benitez, personal communication, January 11, 2017). In addition to sharing the themes and findings from our research, the YCRs made a very specific recommendation for change at BAS: to provide more support for young women in the program. Students at BAS spend half their time in the program on a construction or technology worksite, both of which are traditionally male-dominated fields. Specifically, the YCRs recommended that at BAS: (1) the construction and technology worksites must encourage and support the young women to take on more leadership roles, (2) the worksites must have an active agenda to do more to explicitly prepare young women in the program for these male-dominated fields, and (3) BAS hire more staff members who identify as women on the construction and technology staff. After the YCRs made their recommendation, there was a lively conversation among staff members about how sexism impacts our program, students, and staff and how to better support young women in the program. The YCRs participated and responded alongside staff in this conversation, which made them feel heard and that their voice was valued. Since the presentation, there has been an opportunity to hire new staff members to both the construction and technology departments and both of the new hires were women. Additionally, the week before students begin at BAS, the young women are encouraged to come in for a couple days for community and skill building workshops

with other women in the BAS program. This was previously just available for the young women in the Construction Program, but now applies to women in the Technology Program as well. The courage of the YCRs to speak up about an issue they saw at their school introduced these changes and impacted the experiences of future young people at BAS.

Summary of YCRs' experiences doing YPAR. While the YCRs set out to make an impact on the education system through this research study, they reported that doing YPAR actually affected their own identities and how they saw themselves. By hearing their peers describe their previous experiences in schools, the YCRs reflected on their own experiences in schools. As a result, the YCRs had empathy for the student participants and the difficulties they had faced in schools, which built trust between the YCRs and student participants. However, for many of the YCRs sharing and hearing these stories brought up painful and difficult memories of their own experiences in school. The YCRs and I supported each other and discussed how these stories of past educational traumas were affecting us. The opportunity to process their own educational experiences meant that some of the YCRs saw their own journey of leaving school differently. For some of the YCRs, this processing meant recognizing their self-doubts and appreciating what they had gone through to get to where they are and find success in school. For another YCR, it meant starting to go by her full name as a conscious, deliberate choice she made to better reflect how she saw herself. Another YCR, felt a sense of acceptance of her past educational experiences, which she did not think she would have felt without the solidarity of having shared some of the same experiences

with the other YCRs and student participants. Finally, the presentations were some of the most powerful experiences of the YPAR process for the YCRs. They felt that their advice and recommendations were heard, valued, and carefully considered for future implementation by teachers and administrators attending these presentations. In fact, the YCRs were able to see that their presentation to students and staff at BAS actually made an impact on the school because changes were made to the staffing and program to better support young women in the program. The YCRs were motivated to improve the educational experiences of future young people. The YCRs and I faced and discussed the heartbreaking reality that very little ever seems to change to create more positive experiences for young people in school. And yet, the YCRs felt that through this research that they were doing their part, however small, to represent the stories the student participants had courageously shared with them and in solidarity, speak out about changes to the education system based on these stories. The next section will discuss the limitations and constraints of this research project, what the YCRs and I did to mitigate these limitations and what could be done in the future to further this type of research.

Limitations and Constraints of Study

This research study sought to explore the educational experiences and perceptions of the education system of youth from historically marginalized communities who attended a particular alternative high school in their own words. While other studies may be concerned with objectivity and the ability to generalize findings, this qualitative study focused on depth by collecting rich data from several perspectives to reveal how youth described their experiences at previous schools, of leaving these schools, and at

Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS). In fact, the use of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) methods in this study was intended to interrupt positivist research practices done in the name of objectivity that “others” participants and treats them as objects. Hence, it was crucial that the youth co-researchers (YCRs), who had similar education experiences as the student participants, researched and decided alongside me “what was significant, how it was significant, and how it should be discussed” (Pizarro, 1999, p. 56). In other words, youth had authority in the data collection and analysis processes to help shape the counternarratives shared in the research and how the findings were interpreted. However, there were three main constraints, which I will discuss in this section, that to some extent limited the depth of the research and the authority that the youth had over the presentation and interpretation of the findings. The first and most impactful constraint was time, which limited the amount of member checking with the YCRs and student participants, the depth of the interview process, and our ability to explore additional themes in the research. Second, the Institutional Review Board (IRB) limited the age of the young people who could participate in the study, which meant the perspectives of youth who had most recently left or been pushed out of school were not included in the study. Third, I will discuss how my involvement and researcher positionality as a White, middle class woman, who had largely positive experiences in high school, may impact how this research is viewed and limit people’s ability to view youth as legitimate researchers in their own right. In addition to discussing these limitations, I will also describe what ideas and themes could be further explored in future research.

Time is crucial in qualitative research because valid and trustworthy qualitative research is defined by long-term involvement and rich data (Glesne, 2016; Maxwell, 2013). This research study was designed to include participant observation over substantive periods of time and intensive interviews seeking depth over breadth. The intention of the research was also to provide multiple opportunities to return to YCRs and student participants to member check and validate the presentation and interpretation of the findings. In other words, the research design required a lot of time not just for the YCRs and myself, but also for the student participants. The time constraints and importance of respecting the time and life priorities of the YCRs and student participants, meant that not everyone was able to member check the counternarratives and findings. For example, this research project took place over the course of a year (see Table 9) and yet the average length of stay of students at BAS is eight months. Hence, by the time the YCRs and I had refined our themes and compiled the counternarratives, a couple of the YCRs and several student participants, had graduated or left BAS to pursue their own priorities, for example joining the workforce to support their families. In fact, by September 2017, all the YCRs and all but two of the student participants were no longer attending BAS. In addition, destabilizing factors, such as health issues, loss of family income, changes in housing situations, and deaths in the family, impacted some of these young people's lives, which meant that their priorities necessarily shifted and that they could not participate in the research.

Member checking is a valued qualitative research technique (Glesne, 2016). It was essential to this research because as a decolonizing research practice, it helped

mitigate the potential to colonize the knowledges and educational experiences of the youth participants by telling their stories for them (Smith, 2012). Six out of the eight student participants engaged in member checking our initial interpretations of the findings and four out of the eight student participants had multiple opportunities to read, make changes to, and validate their own counternarratives. Ideally, all eight student participants would have been involved in these processes. However, the time the YCRs and I needed to refine our interpretations and compile the counternarratives meant that not all student participants were available for member checking. Similarly, it was not until the late summer and fall of 2017, that the YCRs and I were more deeply analyzing the data and refining our findings. Hence, by that time only four of the YCRs were available to participate in the deeper data analysis and the presentations that happened in the fall. All of these YCRs were meeting with me on their own time since they were no longer attending BAS. Fortunately, I was able to continue to compensate and honor this time commitment with a stipend, but only through October 2017. Thus, the three meetings with the YCRs, Lulis and Irisa, in December 2017, January 2018, and February 2018 to member check the counternarratives and certain sections of the dissertation, were on their own time. Both Lulis and Irisa were working either part-time or full-time and were experiencing family and personal struggles. I am grateful to their commitment to this research. In the future, research that involves youth through a YPAR methodology should intentionally engage young people in member checking throughout the research process while honoring and compensating them for their intense commitment of time. Additionally, those setting out to do YPAR projects need to plan for and acknowledge the

tension between the extensive time that it takes to do this research well and the time commitment of the young people involved. Respecting the lives and priorities of the young people involved, especially youth from historically marginalized communities who are more likely to be impacted by financial, housing, health, and familial struggles, is essential in YPAR. YPAR projects require that adult researchers practice flexibility and humility in face of inevitable changes to the research plan that will occur along the way.

Time was also a factor that limited how in-depth the YCRs and I could get in the interviews and our ability to return to the participants for follow-up interviews to explore additional themes. Some of the YCRs, student participants, and I had the opportunity to discuss their experiences with the group interview format in Interview 9. For many of the student participants, such as Olivia, the group interview and conversational format of the interviews helped them feel comfortable sharing about their educational experiences.

Olivia described:

Yeah, cuz at first I didn't know if I should open up or should I just not. And then I started to hear people tell their stories and it was kind of making me feel comfortable enough to share my story. And I just went in. (Olivia, Interview 9, June 5, 2017)

However, for other student participants, they wondered if they would have shared more information and content in a one-on-one interview. Ricky requested to do a one-on-one interview because they felt much more comfortable sharing more details about their educational experiences with less people there to judge them. Ricky stated, "I liked the choice to do the specific one-on-one [interview]. Because I wouldn't have shared at all in

the second interview [otherwise]” (Ricky, Interview 9, June 5, 2017). Given that there were between two and five student participants and at least one or two YCRs present at each interview, it meant that the student participants did not have as much time in a 45 minute interview to go into incredible detail about their educational experiences. Multiple group interviews helped capture some of the details and meant that we got more in-depth information. However, interviewing all student participants one-on-one, after they participated in group interviews and developed comfort with the process, may have given them the opportunity to go into further detail. It also would have allowed the YCRs and I to ask more specific follow-up questions of each student participant. As discussed earlier, time constraints would have made it unlikely that every student participant would have been interviewed one-on-one. Yet, future YPAR projects similar to this study, should look at doing a combination of group and one-on-one interviews to gather even richer and more specific information about the student participants’ educational experiences.

There were several themes and ideas that the YCRs and myself wanted to explore, but could not due to time constraints. For example, I wish that we had planned time for the YCRs to create their own questions and interview me about my experiences as a teacher at BAS and as a researcher working alongside them. Also due to time constraints, the YCRs and I were not able to go back and collect additional data from the student participants to explore our interest in several ideas. One thought we wanted to investigate more was whether teachers of certain subjects struggled more to connect with students or show care for their students than others. In particular, we wanted to explore whether student participants’ experiences supported the stereotype that math teachers are more

rigid, less likely to teach in multiple ways, and more disconnected from their students. Some YCRs were also interested in exploring the generational impact that leaving school and being labeled a “dropout” had on families over time. For example, collecting data from the student participants about the educational experiences of their families or having the YCRs interview their family members. This investigation would have to be handled with care since not all the young people involved would be able to or would want to talk about or with their family members. Hopefully, these ideas provide inspiration for future YPAR projects.

Another limitation that was placed on this research study by the IRB was that only young people 18 years old and older could participate in the study as YCRs or participants. BAS serves 17 year-olds and when we presented our study to the student body at BAS, there were definitely 17 year-olds that were eager to participate. The IRB felt that involving youth under 18 was too much of a liability for harm to a vulnerable population because of their age and because they were “dropouts.” Once I shared this feedback and limitation from the IRB with the YCRs, they were surprised and believed that the IRB would see it differently if they visited BAS and met the students. As Lulis, who had just turned 18, wrote, “[the IRB was] underestimating our maturity and professionalism” (Lulis Lares Benitez, researcher notebook, May 15, 2017). Many of the 17 year-olds at BAS have had to make difficult, adult decisions to survive and return to school to complete high school at BAS. The IRB’s feedback represented a deficit-based perspective of what young people are capable of; a perspective that this study and other YPAR studies have pushed back on to show the capability, maturity, and thoughtfulness

of young people as researchers and contributors to important scholarship. Unfortunately, our research study did not include the perspectives and educational experiences of the 17 year-olds at BAS. This constraint was especially limiting because the 17 year-olds would have been speaking about very recent educational experiences. These young people would have the most current knowledge about what is happening in schools that pushed them out or caused them to leave. Ideally, mainstream schools need the perspectives and critiques of the young people who have most recently left to best understand what to change about the current policies and practices of their schools. YPAR studies, like this one, will continue to push on antiquated and deficit-based notions about young people, youth who leave school, and whether youth can do research. It is my hope that the next YPAR study at an alternative school looking to involve youth under 18 years old will not face this same limitation.

Finally, I will share my reflection on how my involvement and identity as a White, middle class woman, who had largely positive experiences in high school, may impact and limit how this research is viewed. This reflection is part of what Pillow (2003) calls “reflexivities of discomfort” (p. 188) and my attempt to name the uncomfortable tensions and limitations that arise when researching with youth where there is unequal power and privilege. I am aware of this tension that as a White, middle class, privileged woman, I made decisions about what is included in the student participants’ counternarratives, albeit with guidance from the YCRs and student participants. When young people who are labeled “dropouts” speak, their voices are too often marginalized, dismissed, and silenced. Through the deliberate presentation of their counternarratives,

by privileging their perspective, knowledge, and experiences about what it means to leave school in their own words, it is an act of social justice in solidarity to elevate their voices to be heard. And yet, as Fine (1994) also wondered, I am left questioning whether this project is deemed true research and scholarship largely because of my involvement as a White woman, with power and privilege. As Fine (1994) noted about her own research on dropouts, “When dropouts speak, few listen. When African American, Latino, Asian, and Native American scholars do the same kinds of work as I do, they are more likely to be heard as biased, self-interested, or without distanced perspective” (p. 80). I would add that if young people, such as the YCRs, were to do this work alone, it is unlikely that it would be classified as research. Thus, I am left asking: What about my presence as an adult, White, middle class woman changes the fact that this is considered research? How has my perspective as an adult, White, middle class woman, and the power and privileges that come with that identity, influenced the presentation of these counternarratives? When are we going to finally listen to what young people have to say and view youth as legitimate researchers in their own right?

In the next chapter, I will synthesize the interpretations of our findings presented in this chapter and explore implications for the education system and further research, in particular to highlight, include, and prioritize youth voice in future educational decision-making and research.

Chapter 5: Discussion

“Schools are fucked up.” (Sk8 Nash, personal communication, October 2017)

These words eventually became the title of the *Education Problem Tree* that the Youth Co-Researchers (YCRs) and I created together to visually represent and synthesize our findings—both the co-constructed themes and counternarratives shared in Chapter 4. Later on in this chapter, I will go into more detail about the Education Problem Tree and how it became an important tool for the YCRs and I to synthesize our findings (see Figure 5 and Table 13). However, I decided to start with Sk8’s words because they concisely and directly sum up the findings and analysis of this research study and because they honor the voices of young people. While other researchers may choose to edit the use of expletives, the YCRs and I felt that Sk8’s words should not be censored. Sk8’s words represent his voice, his rage, and are an honest reflection of the frustrations, hurt, anger, and trauma expressed by the YCRs and student participants throughout this study. Hence, I can think of no other way to better summarize the findings of this study, nor to more beautifully and accurately capture and foreground youth voices and perspectives on their educational experiences, than Sk8’s words: “Schools are fucked up.”

Synthesis of Findings

The main purpose of this research study was to explore the educational experiences of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out from their own perspectives and voices. In particular, the study focused on young people’s perceptions of the education system—both what prevented their success in mainstream schools, and, in contrast, what helped them to thrive in alternative schools.

Ultimately, the study underscored the importance of youth voice and how their voices matter in changing the education system through the use of Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR). From March 2017 to February 2018, for eleven months the YCRs worked alongside me to implement this research study from its design through the data collection and analysis (see Table 9 in Chapter 4). As detailed in Chapters 3 and 4, we started the study with seven YCRs and ended with four YCRs involved in both on-going data analysis and presentations to take action based on our findings. It is important to note this attrition in no way reflects a lack of interest or commitment on the part of these YCRs; it is just a need for them to reprioritize and put more of their time toward working, their health, and/or supporting their families. Together the YCRs and I spent over nine hours conducting multiple, semi-structured group and one-on-one interviews with eight student participants at Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS). We analyzed the interview data together and co-constructed generative themes with help from six of the student participants through member checking. Four of the YCRs and four of the student participants also engaged in member checking the counternarratives I compiled from the interview transcripts. Finally, four of the YCRs and I presented our findings and recommendations six times between June and October of 2017 to future teachers, current teachers and administrators, and staff and students at BAS. In solidarity with the student participants and their educational experiences, the YCRs spoke truth to power, taking action based on our findings to recommend changes to the education system and to BAS.

As mentioned in the literature review in Chapter 2, there was a need for qualitative research from the perspective of youth who have been pushed out of school,

especially research that involves youth in the data collection and analysis process. More specifically, Bautista et al. (2013) noted that the research on school pushout was largely missing the voices of youth from historically marginalized communities, such as the voices of Black and Latinx students and of youth from working class backgrounds. Much of the literature on the pushout rate has focused on the characteristics of the individual who leaves school separately while failing to take into account the institutional factors contributing to school pushout (Bradley & Renzuli, 2011; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger & Rodrigues, 2002; Rumberger & Thomas, 2000; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). As a result, these studies have contributed to the dominant deficit narrative about who drops out by painting a picture of who is “at risk” for dropping out without further examining the institutional context, for example, how schools respond to and treat these students. In contrast, other studies have contextualized students’ experiences inside of the larger sociopolitical, historical, and economic context to construct counternarratives about youth who are pushed out of school (Brown & Rodríguez, 2009; Fine, 1991; Valenzuela, 1999). For example, Orfield et al. (2004) argued that the issue of school pushout is a civil rights issue because it disproportionately affects youth from historically marginalized communities. Additional studies (Chou et al., 2015; De La Ossa, 2005; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Schwartz, 2013; Tuck, 2012) have focused on the institutional factors contributing to school pushout by providing a critique of how mainstream schools typically alienate and drive away youth and what is helping these same youth thrive at alternative schools. However, only two of these studies (Chou et al., 2015; Tuck, 2012) involved youth in the research process and in taking action as a

result of the findings of these studies. Hence, this goal of this research was to enrich the research literature on school pushout by contributing findings and analyses co-constructed *with* youth and in their voices. In the next section, I will restate and provide a summary of the findings and analysis of this study that were detailed in Chapter 4 while showing how they reflect and add to the existing literature.

Revisit the Results

As outlined in Chapter 4, when the YCRs and I met between March 2017 and February 2018 (about 58 times, for a total of 122 hours), we would engage in discussions around data analysis, the research process itself, their journey of seeing themselves as researchers, and how their experience as YCRs affected their identities. The findings and interpretations of our data analysis were divided into four parts: (1) counternarratives, (2) themes co-constructed with the YCRs—the insider perspective, (3) themes from the outsider perspective, and (4) YCRs’ experiences of doing YPAR.

The counternarratives foregrounded the perspectives and lived educational experiences of the student participants, thereby reclaiming space in the research literature for the voices of youth from historically marginalized communities who have been pushed out of school. In contrast, research studies on school pushout that I reviewed in Chapter 2 rarely presented their findings as entire, rich stories from the participants. As a result, they did not let the participants’ words stand on their own before providing thematic interpretation. While the counternarratives in this study were filtered through the interpretations of the YCRs and myself together as I compiled them, they were member checked by several student participants and YCRs. In terms of results, these

counternarratives push back on the dominant dropout narrative and demonstrate how many of the young people leaving school are, in fact, eager to learn and willing to work hard to graduate high school. However, the counternarratives also show how the student participants' traumatic, painful, uncaring, and humiliating experiences in school have contributed to leaving school as an escape and act of self-preservation. The counternarratives reflect the assertions of Schwartz (2013) and Tuck (2012), namely that these youth still care deeply about education and make a responsible choice to seek out alternative schools as an escape from the suffocating and hostile mainstream schools. Finally, supporting the claims of previous studies (Antrop-Gonzalez, 2011; Schwartz, 2013; Tuck, 2012), student participants expressed in the counternarratives that alternative schools can be academically stimulating, identity-affirming, and safe sanctuaries for youth from historically marginalized communities.

The co-constructed themes highlighted the specific ways in which mainstream schools created toxic and uncaring environments for student participants and, in contrast, how student participants described their success at an alternative school. The YCRs and I co-constructed four themes:

1. "I felt invisible to the teachers"
2. "Teaching is a sacred act"
 - a. Show care, love, and compassion for students
 - b. Students want to learn, but it looks many different ways
 - c. What does an excellent teacher do?
3. "Regular high school is like drowning, it's cruel"

4. “Dropping out was [actually] a success”

As previously stated, very few studies on school pushout have strived to put the power over the message in the hands of the young people whose experiences are at the center of the research through the use of YPAR. Hence, the fact that these themes were co-constructed in collaboration with the YCRs, who have had similar experiences as the student participants, make them an important contribution to the research literature. Taken together, these co-constructed themes show what contributes to keeping students actively engaged in school: (1) connection and caring relationships with teachers and (2) an environment where students feel safe to take intellectual and emotional risks, are treated with dignity, and where their many identities are respected and valued. Antrop-González’s (2011) definition of a school as a *radical sanctuary* is reflected/characterized in these two conditions. Similarly in studies at other alternative schools, young people asserted the need for caring relationships, to feel safe and welcomed, and for more compassionate and flexible discipline policies (Chou et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011). We can learn a lot from the YCRs and student participants about what is needed to create a school that is a radical sanctuary where healing as well as learning are primary goals. Until we listen to these young people and act on what they say, schools will continue to reproduce traumatic and harmful experiences, in particular for students from historically marginalized communities who refuse to assimilate to White, middle class values. For example, YCRs and student participants of color expressed that teachers’ racial biases and negative assumptions meant that they were not held to high expectations or were targeted and disciplined more harshly than their White

peers. Schools need to develop curricula, policies, and practices that are inclusive of young people's identities, reflective of their lived experiences, and expansive to do justice to young people's capacity for critical and complex thinking. Otherwise, young people will continue to take action to preserve their identities, refuse to be invisible in schools, and demonstrate their sense of agency by leaving "cruel" school situations to seek out alternatives. These ideas will be discussed further in the implications section of this chapter.

The two themes from the outsider perspective were: (1) leaving school is a traumatic experience and (2) resiliency. As I cautioned readers in Chapter 4, these themes came from my perspective as the outsider and adult researcher in the YPAR process. They are influenced by my particular lens as a White, middle class, academically successful young woman and should, therefore, be given less legitimacy than the co-constructed themes. These findings suggest that while students can escape traumatic experiences by leaving school, there are long-term impacts on the development of their self-worth and their belief in themselves. In fact, the dominant dropout narrative and myth of meritocracy can make youth from historically marginalized communities who leave school particularly vulnerable to developing internalized blame, augmented stereotypes, and a low sense of self. On the one hand, the student participants demonstrated their resiliency and determination in returning to school at BAS to formally complete their high school education. This finding is similar to what Tuck (2012) asserted in her research—that pursuing the GED was students' refusal to "let go of their right to learn and live satisfying lives" (p. 26). On the other hand, while this resiliency is

notable, it also reflects the societal pressure that young people feel to complete high school. Together these themes from the outsider perspective show how the dominant dropout narrative and myth of meritocracy create a stigma around not completing high school that can affect young people negatively and deeply. These results add complexity to what previous studies (Schwartz, 2013; Tuck, 2012), including this one, have noted as the resiliency of students who return to graduate at alternative schools. Depending on a students' situation, there may be limited ways in which they can complete high school. Additionally, it is possible the available pathways to graduation may just reproduce the same educational traumas as students, particularly students of color, experienced in their previous schools. Later in this chapter, I will discuss the need for more expansive pathways for students to complete high school and/or achieve their goals without high school completion that respect their needs and life circumstances and take into account their past educational traumas.

Finally, one of the results of this study was that the YCRs expressed surprise at how much their experiences of doing YPAR impacted them personally. Together and throughout the study, the YCRs processed their own painful experiences at previous schools. Some YCRs made conscious identity shifts in how they saw and described themselves as well as recognized and appreciated their strengths more readily. The YCRs voiced that one of the most profound impacts on them was that they felt that they did have an important critique to offer the education system and that their critique was heard. As Bee stated, "I feel like my experiences and opinions matter and can help change the education experiences for the better" (Bee Beltran, researcher notebook, May 1, 2017).

Similarly, Lulis asserted that during the presentations, “it was the first time I really felt my voice was heard” (Lulis Lares Benitez, personal communication, January 11, 2018). Even more than heard, the recommendations that Lulis shared at the presentation to BAS were respected, carefully considered, and eventually implemented. It is time that the research on school pushout moves beyond simply recognizing youth for their important insights into the education system by involving them in the research itself through YPAR. Inspired by the YPAR studies of Chou et al. (2015) and Tuck (2012), this study sought to disrupt traditional ideas about who does research and what research is for by using YPAR. These results highlight how youth from historically marginalized communities, who have been pushed out of school, *are* researchers. These youth offer fundamentally important perspectives to the literature on school pushout through their direct involvement in the research. These results affirm that research has a responsibility to act “upon (or renam[e]) the world to make it a more just, equitable, and humane place to inhabit” (Mirra, et al., 2016, p. 23). The YCRs took action in solidarity with the youth in this study by recommending changes to the education system in presentations to teachers and administrators. Young people are changemakers. Later in this chapter, I will advocate for further YPAR studies on school pushout to argue the importance of youth demanding changes to the education system from their own perspectives. In the next section, I will present the tool that the YCRs and I collectively used to synthesize our data analysis into a visual representation of *what*, *how*, and *why* the current education system is “fucked up” and failing young people.

Education Problem Tree

The YCRs and I co-created our *Education Problem Tree* to synthesize our findings and analysis of what we heard from the student participants' about their educational experiences into a visual representation. In one image, we were able to capture both the very specific policies and practices in schools that need to change as well as the broader assumptions and ideologies built into the foundation of the school system (see Figure 5). We were inspired by the Problem Tree that Tuck (2008) and the youth researchers in her YPAR study co-created to display both why and how the New York City school system was not working. We developed our Problem Tree throughout the study, beginning the work in March 2017 and spending most of our time on it during our meetings in September and October 2017 (see Appendix A for the research timeline).

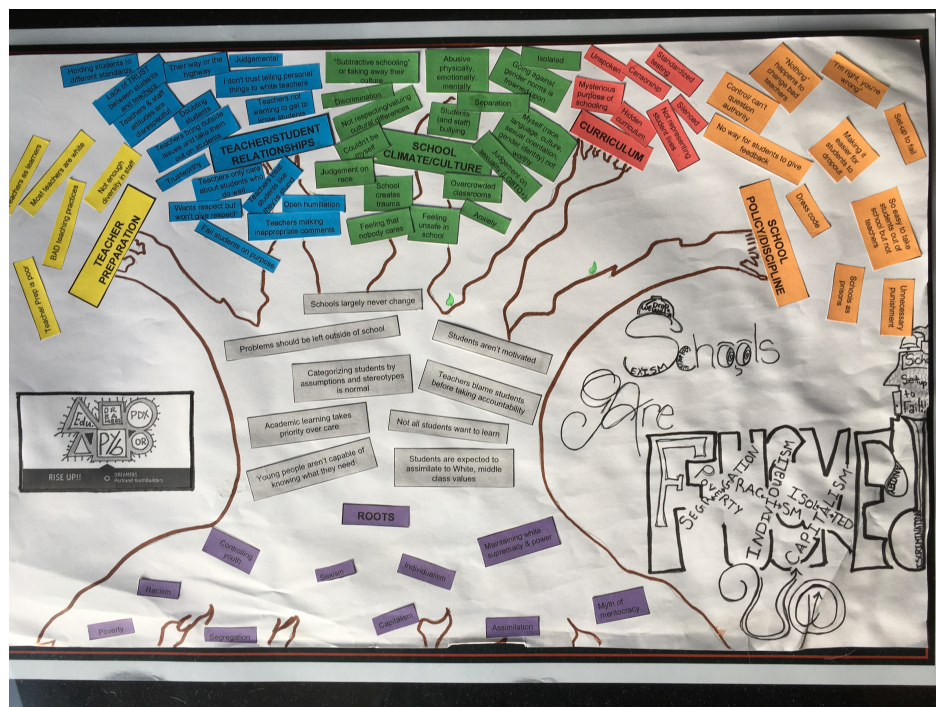


Figure 5. Our Education Problem Tree titled “Schools are Fucked Up”.

For us, the tree was a powerful visual metaphor to show how the problems the YCRs and student participants described in school were informed by deep political, social, and economic structures and ideologies. In our tree the *roots* represented the dominant narratives and political, social, and economic systems that feed the trunk. The *trunk* represented the deeply entrenched and insidious assumptions within the policies and practices of schools. From the trunk, we identified five *branches* or categories where change is needed most in the education system based on our research findings. Finally, the *leaves* of each of these branches represented the specific and often overt ways that the problems within the education system impact young people. See Table 13 for the list of what we identified as the roots, trunk, branches, and leaves.

Table 13

Summary of the Roots, Trunk, Branches, and Leaves of Our Problem Tree

Roots <i>The dominant narratives and political, social, and economic systems that feed the trunk</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Controlling youth¹⁹ • Racism • Poverty • Segregation • Sexism • Individualism • Capitalism • Maintaining White supremacy & power • Assimilation • Myth of meritocracy
Trunk <i>The deeply entrenched assumptions within the</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Schools largely never change • [Personal] problems should be left outside of school • Students aren't motivated • Categorizing students by assumptions and stereotypes is normal • Teachers blame students before taking accountability²⁰

¹⁹ These are verbatim what the YCRs' wrote and are unedited. I have added a few words in brackets for further clarity

<i>polities and practices of schools</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Academic learning takes priority over care • Not all students want to learn • Young people aren't capable of knowing what they need • Students are expected to assimilate to White, middle class values
Branches <i>The categories where change is needed most in the education system</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher preparation • Teacher/Student Relationships • School Climate/Culture • Curriculum • School Policy/Discipline
Leaves <i>The specific and often overt ways that the problems within the education system impact young people</i>	<p><u>Teacher preparation</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher prep is poor • Teachers as learners • BAD teaching practices • Not enough diversity in staff • Most teachers are White <p><u>Teacher/Student Relationships</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Holding [different] students to different standards • Lack of TRUST between students and teachers • Teachers & staff attitudes are disrespectful • Doubting students • Trustworthy • I don't trust telling personal things to White teachers • Teachers bring outside issues and take them out on students • Their [teachers'] way or the highway • Judgmental • Teachers not wanting to get to know students • Teachers only care about students who do well • Teachers treat students like they're stupid

²⁰ YCRs' meant that teachers will blame students before ever taking responsibility for their own actions

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wants respect but won't give respect • Open humiliation²¹ • Teachers making inappropriate comments • Fail students on purpose <p><u>School Climate/Culture</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Subtractive schooling” or taking away their culture • Abusive physically, emotionally, mentally • Isolated • Going against [conventional] gender norms is frowned-upon • Separation • Myself (race, language, culture, sexual orientation, gender identity) not worthy • Judgment on sexuality (LGBTQ+) • Students (and staff) bullying • Discrimination • Not respecting/valuing cultural differences • Couldn't be myself • Judgment on race • School creates trauma • Feeling that nobody cares • Feeling unsafe in school • Overcrowded classrooms • Anxiety <p><u>Curriculum</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Standardized testing • Censorship • Unspoken • Silenced • Mysterious purpose of schooling • Hidden curriculum • Not representing student lives <p><u>School Policy/Discipline</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Nothing” happens to change bad teachers • “I’m right, you’re wrong” • Control/can’t question authority • No way for students to give feedback
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²¹ Being called out in front of the whole class (put on blast) by the teacher

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Set-up to fail • Making it easier for students to “drop out” • Dress code • So easy to take students out of school but not teachers²² • Unnecessary punishment • Schools as prisons
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The Problem Tree helped inform our recommendations for change to the education system that we shared in our presentations. For the YCRs and myself it clarified that the problems described by the student participants with teacher preparation, teacher/student relationships, school climate/culture, curriculum, and school policy/discipline are fed by and born out of the assumptions and ideologies in the foundation of the school system. It is no accident that these problems exist in the education system given that it is founded on the ideas and assumptions shown in our Education Problem Tree. For example, it is no wonder that young people, in particular youth from historically marginalized communities, feel that the curriculum does not reflect their lives given that the education system is fed by assimilation and the maintenance of White supremacy and built on the assumptions that students’ outside problems should not be brought into school and that students must assimilate to White, middle class values. The Education Problem Tree also makes clear that making changes to the education system is more than just finding solutions to address the leaves of the tree. Instead, it means dismantling the structures at the very roots of the tree and deprogramming the system and ourselves of the assumptions and ideologies. Hence,

²² Students are hastily taken out of schools, whereas bad teachers are shuffled around to different schools or nothing seems to happen from the students’ perspectives.

when presenting the significance and implications of this study in the next sections, I will address not only the issues listed in the branches and leaves of our Education Problem Tree, but also what is found in its roots and trunk.

Significance: Co-creating Spaces for Youth Voice, Healing, and Empathy

At the heart of this study was the assumption that youth from historically marginalized communities have been silenced and disenfranchised by being pushed out of school. Consequently, from the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study was born a research design that foregrounded the voices and perspectives of youth and where youth were positioned as co-researchers with influence over the data collection and analysis, as well as, the presentation and interpretation of findings. As the YCRs and I co-constructed new knowledge about school (sociocultural theory), we used a critical theory lens to ensure that we focused on the voices on the margins from members of historically marginalized communities. Our focus on cultural capital along with a critical theory lens ensured that we used non-dominant knowledges, practices, and approaches to co-construct new knowledge about school. And thus, from this interaction of cultural capital and critical theory lenses, emerged our commitment to YPAR. YPAR is research *with* youth: the YCRs co-constructed knowledge based on their own experiences and what they learned from the student participants; the YCRs were part of the entire research process from learning the research methods as necessary tools for data collection to analysis and synthesis; and, they took necessary actions to make change based on their research findings. In other words, it was the goal of this YPAR research study to create space for youth voice, experience, and knowledge to enter into dominant educational

research, speak truth to power, and potentiate change in education. In this section, I will highlight three areas of significance of this study within the greater context of the education system: (1) honoring and reclaiming youth voice, (2) alternative schools as places for healing, (3) foregrounding empathy in classrooms and research. Taken together, these areas of significance address and debunk all nine assumptions forming the trunk of our Education Problem Tree (see Figure 5 and Table 13).

Honoring and Reclaiming Youth Voice

Through YPAR, this study co-created space with young people, the YCRs, to reclaim their voices and potentiate change in the education system with recommendations from their perspectives. The significance, in terms of the greater context of the education system, is that the work the YCRs and I did together provides a concrete example that challenges the insidious assumptions we identified in the practices and policies of schools in the trunk of our Education Problem Tree (see Figure 5 and Table 13). Specifically, in this section I will focus on how reclaiming youth voice in this study challenges the assumptions: not all students want to learn, schools largely never change, and young people are not capable of knowing what they need.

The counternarratives were a space for young people involved in the study to tell the stories of their educational experiences in their own words and on their own terms. While I compiled them from what the student participants shared in the interviews, I did it with guidance from the YCRs and member checking from some of the participants themselves. By foregrounding the voices of youth in these counternarratives, the youth participants were able to describe their perceptions of the education system from their

own perspective. As a result, the counternarratives present a very different view than the assumptions from teachers and other adults found in our Education Problem Tree. In particular, youth participants asserted their desire to learn and were able to clearly describe what they needed, but did not get from their mainstream high schools. In her counternarrative, Olivia shared that she learned a lot more about herself, her goals, and her culture in the year and a half before starting BAS than she did at her mainstream school. Martin also asserted that he wanted to learn and recalled that:

There was a time when school was cool. There was a time when I was like, “Yeah, this school, I like school.” But kids just made it a lot harder. I was one of those students. I wanted to learn, but the fact that those kids were yelling. It's hard. So, I just decided like not even to try I was just like, “Fuck it,” basically. I really said that. I was like, “Fuck this shit.” Can't do it. I just felt like an outcast in a way. (Martin, Interview 5, May 4, 2017)

For Martin, the overcrowded, chaotic, and unfriendly environment of his school made learning very difficult to the point where he felt he had to give up on learning. Later on in his counternarrative, Martin shared that he felt his teachers put him last and chose to work with students who more overtly show eagerness to learn. Other student participants, including Manny, shared a similar story in their counternarratives. For example, Manny describes how teachers believed that, “They [some students] didn't deserve that time because these [other] students are more ahead or more involved here” (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017). Teachers may have assumed that Martin, Manny, and others did not want to learn, but they were wrong. Even more alarming is that student participants

described how teachers were more likely to make assumptions about whether students wanted to learn when students came from different backgrounds than their own.

According to Manny, teachers would think, “I’ve known these students longer. I can relate to these students” and that’s why they would help those students (Manny, Interview 10, June 8, 2017). Given that the majority of teachers are White, it suggests that teachers may be more likely to assume young people of color are not interested in learning. Adults get it wrong. Students want to learn. The youth from historically marginalized communities involved in this study wanted to learn, but were not given what they needed to be able to learn effectively. However, teachers and administrators will not see that they are wrong until, *with* young people, they co-create spaces for youth to reclaim their voices and expose the assumptions adults are making, which perpetuate harmful school practices and policies.

This research study is a testament to the ability of young people to know what they need, especially as learners, and advocate for it. The counternarratives and co-constructed themes are proof that youth know what they need. Schools are built around antiquated power structures with little transparency, so adults are making decisions about what students need when, instead, we need to trust young people to be experts in their own lives (Stovall, 2016). The research literature on alternative education (Chou et al., 2015; Iachini et al., 2013; Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011) asserted that young people are capable of providing valuable insights into what is not working for them at their schools and what they need to learn. De La Ossa (2005) concluded “the voices of students can and should be a vehicle for the future. Ultimately, a high school is only what an

individual young person perceives it to be” (p. 37). Similarly, one of the YCRs, Lulis wrote: “[My voice matters] because I’m a young person and that’s what the education is for” (Lulis Lares Benitez, March 28, 2017). If young people are whom the education system is for, then they should have control and say over what happens in school and how schools are run. And yet, controlling youth is one of the roots of our Education Problem Tree, which feeds and perpetuates the problems seen in schools.

In fact, the impact of this deeply entrenched belief in silencing, dismissing, and controlling youth extends beyond the education system into educational research. One of the largest barriers I faced in doing this research study was gaining approval to begin my study from the university’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Underlying the feedback from the IRB were blatant negative assumptions about youth, in this case youth from historically marginalized communities, and a need to control young people. In the first of two rounds of revisions I made, the IRB reviewer suggested that to protect student participants from possible breaches of confidentiality, I should opt to not have the youth be co-researchers. The IRB wrote: “the opportunities for breach of confidentiality and possible discomfort from sharing experiences with other youth makes the participants very vulnerable. The reviewer recommends the youth not be co-researchers but still participate in the study” (IRB, email communication, January 31, 2017). Not only was this suggestion unacceptable given the goals of my study and my theoretical and methodological framework, it was laced with distrust of young people and their ability to hold information about their peers confidential. In the second round of revisions, I was asked to show proof of how I would be tracking that the YCRs were spending 20 hours

per week on the research study, especially since they were receiving a stipend. This request for extra scrutiny on the time the YCRs were spending seemed beyond the scope of the IRB and more about assurance that I was controlling and overseeing the “productivity” of YCRs. The authentic commitment and dedication of the YCRs to over 122 hours of meetings, in particular Irisa, Lulis, Maria, and Sk8, who continued attending meetings even after the summer break, exposes the IRB’s request as misguided, petty, and unnecessary. Ultimately, I believe that the IRB finally approved the study because I raised the age limit for participants and YCRs from 17 to 18 years old. In Chapter 4, I discussed how this limited the data the YCRs and I collected and as a result, there were voices of young people at BAS who went unheard. In this study, young people reclaimed their voices, shared their educational experiences, and thus provided important insights into what needs to change about the education system. This study serves as a mirror that when held up to the education system and field of educational research, reflects how they are both built on incorrect and harmful assumptions about the need to control youth; and, therefore, greatly underestimate young people’s ability to advocate for what they need.

This research study shows how a school, BAS, made changes because it co-created space with the YCRs to speak their truths, share their recommendations, and reclaim their voices within the education system. The space needs to be co-created with young people and the adult teachers and administrators for change in the school to occur. The YCRs are certainly not the first young people to describe these problems in school and advocate for these changes in schools. It is disheartening to think about how many students have voiced the need for these changes and how many times it went unheard

and/or dismissed. In the case of our research, having the YCRs co-construct space with staff, including myself, to present the findings and recommendations, meant that the BAS staff was much more receptive to the changes. It is important to note that within that co-created presentation space, the YCRs' voices were still prioritized and they were the lead facilitators of what and how their perspectives were shared. As a result, the YCRs' recommendations were thoughtfully considered and implemented at BAS. The school did change! In order to upend the assumption that schools never change, the results of this study suggest that schools co-create spaces *with* youth where young people can reclaim their voices and have their ideas for school changes be heard by teachers and administrators. In the implications section of this chapter, I will discuss further the ways in which young people and schools can co-create spaces for YPAR projects from the classroom to the district-wide level. In the YPAR study from Chou et al. (2015), the youth researchers asserted, "nothing about us without us!" (p. 453). In other words, youth need to be involved and their ideas heard when it comes to making effective changes in schools. Additionally, for schools to make meaningful changes, they need to take seriously the critiques of the youth who are leaving because they know firsthand the blind spots, gaps, and what is not working about the school (Jeff Duncan-Andrade, personal communication, September 27, 2017). Ultimately, the significance of this study in reclaiming spaces for youth voice in schools and in research is that change is possible if adults are: ready to co-create spaces with youth to share what they need; prepared to give youth leadership of this space; and willing to hear and carefully consider those critiques.

Alternative Schools as Places of Healing

Another aspect of this research study that is significant in the greater context of the school system is how it shows that alternative schools can play an important role in helping young people, who have been pushed out, and begin to heal themselves from their educational wounds. As detailed in Chapter 4, this research study found that youth participants and the YCRs still harbored feelings of self-blame and a low sense of self after leaving their mainstream school. The deeply embedded ideologies of the myth of meritocracy and dominant dropout narrative reinforce that it is the individual who should be blamed for leaving school. These ideologies suggest that students who “drop out” of school should have worked harder, done more, or perhaps were not smart enough or good enough to succeed by graduating high school. The danger of these ideologies is that they do not take into account what the school system is doing to push these students out. They also fail to recognize what youth from historically marginalized communities are forced to do or give up by assimilating to White, middle class values to be successful in school (Emdin, 2016; Valenzuela, 1999). Consequently, young people who leave school can internalize this blame and low self-worth, despite having a strong critique of how their school failed them. Even worse, they may internalize blame and negative feelings about themselves—their cultural, racial, linguistic, and/or other identities—because they could not or would not assimilate with the majority population by failing to adhere to the White, middle class values that are normalized in schools. Students who leave school, even as an act of self-preservation, often need to heal from these assumptions and societal ideologies, which are represented in the trunk and roots of our Education Problem Tree

(see Figure 5 and Table 13).

The stories of student participants and YCRs highlight the significance of alternative schools in providing a space that is identity-affirming and healing. Many of the student participants and YCRs described the alternative school BAS they have been attending as a part of their family. For example, Olivia described how: “you guys [the BAS staff] actually show that you guys care and you guys are concerned. And even though this is a school, you guys treat us like family” (Olivia, Interview 1, April 13, 2017). For Olivia the feeling of family is about being supported, known, and cared for by teachers. The small size of BAS (serving about 100 students per year, with 50 enrolled at a given time) also helps to reinforce this sentiment because teachers and staff are better able to get to know each other and have adequate time to support each other. Peter expressed how BAS helped him to rediscover his intelligence, which he had severely doubted since leaving his mainstream school. He reflected:

One thing this school [BAS] helped me out with though is they helped me not feel stupid...[After I left school] I felt like so just doubting myself so much and I thought I was literally just mentally ill...And now I see myself as a lot more intellectual than I thought I was. (Peter, Interview 3, April 27, 2017)

As a result of his time at BAS, Peter was able to develop a stronger sense of his own worth and intelligence. For Xavier, his time at BAS helped him recognize what he was capable of and the opportunities he had for the future. Xavier stated, “[At BAS] I feel like I can continue my future and I feel like a lot of opportunity that I can see, things I could do. It’s like a pathway that looks so clear” (Xavier, Interview 6, May 22, 2017). Xavier

was not optimistic about his future before starting BAS. While at BAS he had the opportunity to reacquaint himself with his strengths and skills, which his experiences around leaving his mainstream school had caused him to doubt. Similarly, Bee confronted some of her self-doubts and self-blame for leaving school while at BAS. Bee reflected:

I have a lot of self-doubts and stuff but I don't necessarily give myself the praise that I deserve. But it's different being here [at BAS]...When Martin said that dropping out was a success that was a powerful statement and I don't know, it was a different way of thinking than I was used to because I was told for so long that dropping out and getting a GED was something bad. It made you lesser. And it was just really great to hear something different. Yeah, I never thought about it that way. That just really helped. (Bee, Interview 11, June 13, 2017)

Even more significant in what Bee said, is that what helped her to face and begin to heal from her self-doubts was hearing how Martin described his experience of leaving school through this research process. By intentionally taking the time for students to share their past experiences in mainstream schools and their stories of leaving school, alternative schools can make space with students for processing and healing from the educational traumas they have experienced.

Alternative schools serving as spaces of healing for young people who have been pushed out of school reflects Antrop-González's (2011) concept of schools as "radical sanctuaries." He defined a school as a radical sanctuary when it: "(a) fosters student-teacher caring relationships, (b) provides a gang-free safe space, and (c) affirms students'

racial/ethnic identities” (p. 77). Similarly, Schwartz (2013) found that the GED program in her study served as a counter-space for the young men in her study by affirming their often-marginalized life and racial experiences. These characteristics of a radical sanctuary and counter-space are certainly echoed in how student participants and YCRs described BAS. The youth in this study felt cared for by teachers, safe from past bullying and fighting, and that they could be themselves more fully at BAS. For example, Olivia stated: “It’s like you guys [staff at BAS] understand us. I think that’s another thing that makes it easier. We have teachers that *actually* understand [us]” (Olivia, Interview 1, April 13, 2017, emphasis added). While BAS is by no means a perfect school, the small size and relationship-based approach assist it to better embody to the characteristics of a *radial sanctuary* and counter-space for students who have been pushed out of schools elsewhere. Teachers and students are able to get to know each other and students’ identities are seen, affirmed, and valued. Young people at BAS share and connect about their past educational experiences and as a result can begin to heal from their various past educational trauma involving bullying, assimilation, harsh discipline, etc. Hence, alternative schools not only serve as another pathway for students to graduate high school, but can also be important sites of healing for young people who have left school. Alternative schools can embrace this role wholeheartedly by implementing ways to intentionally help young people heal themselves. For example, alternative schools can create space with youth to share and reflect on their past educational experiences and then help them reframe their experiences inside of the larger systemic issues within the education system that pushed them out earlier. Finally, mainstream schools can also learn

from the practices and policies of alternative schools in order to better support and care for the youth from historically marginalized communities in their buildings. Later, in the implications section, I will discuss how teacher preparation programs can support teachers to develop the capacity to create classrooms that are identity affirming, put care over content, and foster strong relationships and empathy. Making empathy visible in the classroom and in research is the third and final significance of this study, which I will discuss in the next section.

Foregrounding Empathy in Classrooms and Educational Research

Alternative schools, like BAS, can be spaces of healing as described in the previous section, because empathy is foregrounded in the classroom. The significance of this study is that youth talking to other youth about themselves and their past educational experiences foregrounded empathy between the young people with positive consequences. Youth processed their past, felt less alone, and felt less of a need to blame themselves. Hence, learning from and implementing YPAR methods in the classroom and further research studies will foreground empathy in these spaces; and thus, making them more likely to be radical sanctuaries for youth from historically marginalized communities. Empathy was also a way to build trust—both students trusting teachers and teachers trusting students.

The voices of youth in this study speak out against the assumptions that, “problems [from home] should be left outside of school” and “academic learning takes priority over care” in the trunk of our Education Problem Tree (see Figure 5 and Table 13). In fact, the counternarratives and co-constructed themes from the YCRs showed that

these youth desired a connection and relationship with their teachers where they could share what was going on with them outside of school to build understanding and to break down negative assumptions. These young people also wanted, as Valenzuela (1999) found in her research with youth, to be cared for and loved by their teachers before they could show care for school itself. For teachers, it is important that they recognize and validate the lived experiences of the students in their classes who may be dealing with challenging circumstances that no child or young person should have to go through (Jeff Duncan-Andrade, personal communication, September 27, 2017). Asking students to leave their problems outside the classroom means asking them to leave a part of themselves at the door and not enter as a whole person. It would seem ridiculous and harmful to ask a student to leave their arm or leg at the door of a classroom, yet asking a student to leave their pain and problems outside is just the same. When young people are asked to assimilate to school culture by not bringing their lived experiences and emotions into the classroom, it is harmful and it creates personal repression that can result in traumatizing youth (Emdin, 2016). Foregrounding empathy in the classroom can disrupt this repression and assimilation because it allows the teacher and students to co-create space for talking about emotions and their day-to-day lived experiences. As a result, both teachers and students can more fully be themselves in the classroom.

When we were refining the interview protocol, the YCRs were very focused on creating empathy in the interview process. Lulis reflected: “As a researcher, I want to be trustworthy. I want people to feel safe and comfortable being open with me” (Lulis Lares Benitez, researcher notebook, March 28, 2017). The YCRs were very thoughtful about

how to set up the interview space to make it more comfortable for the student participants and how to respond to them when they shared their educational experiences with understanding and empathy. Since the YCRs had gone through similar experiences in education as the student participants, it helped them to more readily access an empathetic response during the interview. For example, here is what Irisa, one of the YCRs, told Ricky at the end of one of the interviews:

I feel like I know you, but hearing your story today in here makes me feel even closer to you and okay, I'm not alone, you know...and I just feel really proud that I even got to know you, got to have the opportunity to be here with you in this space...if you ever need to talk to me or anything...I can really hear you well, be on that level with you. I can ride it out with you. I can sit and actually...I'm here for you. (Irisa, Interview 8, June 1, 2017)

Irisa showed true empathy and was in that moment with Ricky because Irisa shared similar educational traumas as Ricky. As another example of building empathy into our research process, Sk8 came up with the idea to give thank you cards to each student participant after each interview to honor their vulnerability and appreciate them for sharing their stories. Many student participants kept their thank you cards with them in their binders even after the interviews were over. An example of a thank you card is found in Appendix G. Thus, by involving YCRs with insider perspectives throughout the research process, we co-created spaces with the student participants that made empathy visible in the group interviews.

One of the concerns of the Institutional Review Board (IRB) was that the student

participants would feel uncomfortable talking with the YCRs since they interact with them every day at school. They wrote: “Also, it may be more difficult for the youth participants to feel comfortable talking with the researchers since they know them quite well and interact with them daily” (IRB, email communication, March 2, 2017). The IRB was also concerned that the YCRs involvement in the interviews would negatively affect how they interacted with the student participants. On the contrary, because the research methodology foregrounded empathy, student participants expressed that the YCRs’ involvement created connection and made them feel less alone and ashamed of their previous experiences in high school. As Ricky asserted, “If anything I feel like it [the interview process with YCRs] grew people together, stronger,” (Ricky, Interview 9, June 5, 2017). Friday also described how the interview process and involvement of the YCRs created empathy and connection. She stated:

All you can really do when you hear their stories is try and feel them and not judge them, but try and see yourself walking down that and like feeling their emotions...It made a bond. Making connections...you can never really understand someone's story one hundred percent, but you can try and empathize. (Friday, Interview 9, June 5, 2017)

Both Friday and Ricky mention that a feeling of strong connection between the young people in the study was one of the positive consequences of foregrounding empathy in the interview process. Olivia also described other positive affects it had on her. She asserted that the interviews and the involvement of the YCRs: “It makes you feel better...kind of better because you know you're not alone. You know that other people

have been through similar or same situations, so you don't feel embarrassed or like you're too behind or a failure” (Olivia, Interview 9, June 5, 2017). By empathizing and hearing that other students had been through similar situations, Olivia felt less isolated and ashamed because it was easier to see her experiences as part of a systemic problem that had affected other youth and not because there was something wrong with her.

Foregrounding empathy and youth sharing experiences with each other in the classroom and in educational research is important because it is an effective way for students to reframe their past experiences as part of larger systemic issues, instead of blaming themselves. In the case of this research study, foregrounding empathy allowed for the youth in the study to put their educational experiences in the greater context of practices and policies that push out youth, and thus in their counternarratives push back on the dominant dropout narrative. In light of this significant outcome of the research study, BAS recently added time at the beginning of each academic day for small groups of students and their teachers to sit in a community circle and share what is going on for them in their lives, what they need to feel supported that day, and about their current and past educational experiences. Changes to school programming, such as what BAS did, is one example of the implications for changing practices and policies at the school, district, and educational research level that will be discussed in the next section of this chapter.

Implications

Youth Participatory Action Research (YPAR) challenges research to be more than just about collecting and analyzing data, interpreting and presenting findings, but also about taking action alongside youth in the study to advocate for changes that from their

insider perspective will make their communities better. In the case of this YPAR study, the YCRs and I took action in solidarity with the youth voices foregrounded in this study to recommend changes to the education system in front of teachers and administrators. In our presentations, we focused on the four co-constructed themes as a way to push back the assumptions that teachers and administrators may have about students and to assert what we felt needed to change about the education system. Those four co-constructed themes were: (1) “I felt invisible to the teachers,” (2) “Teaching is a sacred act,” (3) “Regular high school is like drowning, it’s cruel,” and (4) “Dropping out was [actually] a success.” These themes largely focused on two conclusions: (1) what teachers can do to care for, support, and connect with youth to help improve their experiences in schools, and (2) that in an act of self-preservation youth leave their mainstream schools to escape from toxic, cruel, assimilationist, and traumatic school experiences. Given the theoretical and methodological frameworks of this study, it is essential that the implications I discuss in this chapter be based on and reflective of the perspectives and voices of the YCRs and student participants. Hence, the implications I discuss will be centered on these two conclusions, as well as, the issues the YCRs and I identified in our Education Problem Tree (see Figure 5 and Table 13). As the Education Problem Tree shows, there are a multitude of areas to highlight in terms of implications for policy and practice within the school system. While not exhaustive, I chose to focus on three recommendations in this chapter: (1) including student voice in teacher preparation, (2) expanding the misleadingly named “multiple pathways” to graduation in Oregon, and (3) making YPAR part of standard school practice. Taken together, these recommendations have

implications for future changes to the practices and policies at multiple levels from the classroom to the district and state, and all the way to education research itself.

Youth Voice in Teacher Preparation

Based on the counternarratives and co-constructed themes, teachers play an incredibly important role in students' lives and have a major impact on students' educational experiences. In fact, several of the student participants and YCRs stated that if they could change one thing about their past high school experiences, they would change the teachers. Often the focus of what did not work for youth at their previous high schools had to do with teachers and what did work for them at BAS were the practices and approaches of the teachers and staff. Hence, the practices and approaches of teachers can influence whether a student decides that the school is a good fit for them and whether they choose to stay at the school. When reflecting on how the student participants and YCRs described what they needed from their teachers, I was left wondering whether teacher preparation programs are preparing teachers to be the kind of educators and supporters that youth in this study said that they needed.

While this list is not exhaustive, below is a summary of what the student participants and YCRs said they needed teachers to do:

- Put care for students over content
- Bring students' lived experiences in the classroom
- Present multiple ways to learn concepts
- Stand up for students in the face of bullying and harmful school policies (harsh

discipline, standardized testing, etc.)

- Get to know students, especially the students you are struggling the most to connect with
- Continually challenge your stereotypes and negative assumptions about youth
- Have compassion for what is going on for students outside of school
- Be humble, admit mistakes, and learn from students
- Be flexible to what students say they need
- Create a classroom environment where it is acceptable for students to ask questions, give feedback, question/critique the curriculum, and influence what happens in the classroom

Based on this list from students' perspectives describing the teachers they need, I recommend that teacher education programs prepare teachers for: (1) creative insubordination, (2) culturally sustaining pedagogy, (3) building strong, caring teacher-student relationships as much as teaching content, and (4) incorporating students' voice and leadership in the classroom. As I make a case for each one of these recommendations based on what youth asserted in this study, I will also show how the edTPA, the current assessment of teacher readiness and preparation in Oregon and nationally, may prevent teachers from developing these skills and abilities that students need most.

Creative insubordination is essential to teachers being able to stand up for their students, particularly students from historically marginalized communities, in the face of school rules and policies that may be racist, sexist, exclusionary, or otherwise harmful. Gutiérrez (2015) defines creative insubordination as bending the rules to maintain a

higher moral standard in advocating for students. Teachers need to be adept at knowing when to play the game of school—what they must do to keep their job and to avoid too much scrutiny from the administration—and when they can change the game of school—advocate for change, circumvent school policies, and take a different approach than what is required—in order to best meet the needs of their students (Gutiérrez, 2009). Similarly, Freire (1970) and hooks (1994) asserted “no education is politically neutral” (p. 37). For example, for teachers to put care over content in their classroom, one of the recommendations of youth in this study, they may have to bend the rules around content delivery. They may have to be ready to justify why they are not following the department calendar, which directs them to teach certain learning targets on specific days. Creative insubordination can also mean advocating for change by representing and engaging students’ voices in changes beyond the classroom, for example, at faculty meetings and at the educational policy level. Consequently, it is a political act and it takes nuance, creativity, and a well-developed, critical understanding of the education system and whom it serves. Hence, it takes time within a teacher preparation program for teachers to practice creative insubordination and recognize how and when to challenge the deficit views about their students in the day-to-day moments as a teacher (Gutiérrez, 2015). And yet, as a performance assessment of teaching, the edTPA educes teaching to a series of technical, predictable, visible, and apolitical acts (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). As a result, teacher preparation programs centered around the edTPA, may not prepare teachers well enough to advocate for their students from historically marginalized communities through creative insubordination. The teachers who pass the edTPA may be ready to teach

according to Pearson, Inc., the company that designs and assesses the edTPA, but may not be ready to be the kind of teachers that the youth in this study asserted that they need.

In this study, the student participants and YCRs described that they needed teachers who validate and affirm their lived experiences, identities, and multiple ways of approaching learning. Although they did not use this terminology, they were describing culturally sustaining pedagogy (CSP). CSP means that students' everyday life experiences are brought into the classroom and it supports and fosters multilingualism and multiculturalism in school practices. Additionally, CSP affirms students' racial, gender, cultural, and other identities while challenging the stereotypes and negative assumptions about those same identities. Through honoring students' cultural and linguistic resources and their multiple approaches to learning, CSP practices help students to develop more than just academic skills; they also help students foster social consciousness, cultural integrity, a stronger sense of self-worth and ability, and a value in community (Paris & Alim, 2017). However, in their study on the impact of the edTPA on teacher candidates in New York, Tuck and Gorlewski (2016) found that the edTPA reinforced the use of White, middle class norms and teaching approaches, instead of CSP practices. "Teacher candidates wondered aloud how student behavior that did not conform to White, middle-class, academic norms might influence scorers' evaluations, especially as scorers would be unfamiliar with local contexts" (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016, p. 203). In fact, the edTPA is far from a culturally sustaining assessment because it promotes a false understanding that there is universal agreement on how effective teaching looks and is measured. On the contrary, effective teachers use a variety of

strategies and approaches that may be culturally-influenced and/or specific to the learners in their classroom and local context. Given the critique that the edTPA has narrowed what is seen as effective teaching to approaches normed to White, middle class values, teacher preparation programs may not prepare teachers with CSP practices, which the youth in this study described that they need.

One of the strongest requests of young people in this study and throughout the research literature on alternative education is that they desire strong and caring relationships with their teachers. With a largely White teaching force, this means that teacher preparation programs need to help teachers with strategies for connecting and co-creating empathy with students across differences in racial, cultural, linguistic, gender, socioeconomic identities and backgrounds. It is unlikely that White teachers will share the same cultural experiences as the students of color in the classroom and as a result they are more likely to act on their racial bias, stereotypes, and misconceptions about young people of color. Teacher preparation programs can help teachers, specifically White teachers, to deconstruct their racial biases, develop more self-awareness about their privilege, and learn approaches for building authentic connections with students across differences. Unfortunately, “privileging contemporary White, elite cultural norms through the normalization of mechanisms such as edTPA reinforces beliefs and assumptions that hinder the formation of authentic, dialogic relationships” (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016, p. 205). While the edTPA asks teacher candidates to demonstrate rapport with students, these relationships may be based on White, middle class values of connection. Hence, the edTPA is not helping teacher candidates prepare for the authentic,

caring, and culturally sustaining relationships that students in this study described that they need with teachers.

Additionally, teacher preparation programs should be recruiting, supporting, and graduating more teachers of color. Youth of color in this study, such as Manny, described how White teachers misperceived their behavior as disruptive or insubordinate. These youth wanted more teachers of color that could more readily relate to them and understand their racialized and lived experiences. In contrast, Tuck and Gorlewski (2016) found that White teachers were more likely to pass the edTPA, than teachers of color. Given that youth in this study spoke up about wanting more teachers of color and described that they needed teachers that could relate to them, the edTPA may be preventing the teachers that students need from ever joining the profession.

Contrary to the assumptions within the education system that undervalue young people, this study helped show that youth are capable of describing what they need and want from teachers and their education. Hence, youth need to reclaim, or perhaps claim for the first time, space for their voices within teacher preparation. Given Tuck and Gorlewski's (2016) critique of the edTPA, it appears that teacher preparation programs may not be graduating teachers who are prepared to be like the teachers that the youth in this study described that they needed. These students do not want teachers whose approaches and practices are grounded in White, middle class values and norms. These are the teachers who will most likely struggle to develop authentic relationships with students and allow their racial biases to inform how they perceive their interactions with students. In other words, these teachers are more likely to reproduce the same negative

experiences that the youth in this study were trying to escape from when they left school. I believe that young people have important insights into whether a teacher candidate is a good fit and is ready to be a teacher. So, I recommend that teacher preparation programs incorporate students' voices and feedback into their education and assessment of teacher candidates. I suggest that teacher preparation programs work with teacher candidates to develop their own processes for authentically involving students in giving feedback and then implementing the feedback before starting their student teaching placement. Later on in the section on YPAR as school practice, I will build from Emdin's (2016) research to go into more detail about how this system of youth feedback could work. Given the significance of this research study, at the very minimum teacher preparation programs should prepare teacher candidates with strategies for incorporating students' voices in the classroom and with approaches for co-creating space with young people to have influence and leadership in the classroom.

True Multiple Pathways to Education

In the counternarratives and co-constructed themes of this study, the student participants and YCRs shared their stories of leaving their mainstream schools to escape from toxic, cruel, assimilationist, and traumatic school experiences as an act of self-preservation. As a result, in Martin's words, dropping out was actually a success, because he and others got out of a situation that was not working for them and in many cases doing harm. Ame's mother advised her to: "just drop out of high school right now and we'll find a different alternative for you cuz it's not working" (Ame, Interview 2, April 20, 2017). After taking a break from school, the student participants described how they

began looking for an alternative school where they could complete high school. Some student participants tried other schools before finding BAS. All the students in the study expressed that, at the time, BAS was the right school for them and that they were finding success there. For example, Olivia asserted:

I'm like, "Damn this school is small." Ever since [my first impression] it's just been a perfect fit for me. I used to go to a lot of different schools too, so for me to actually want to come here it's like new and I'm like this is what I needed this whole time. (Olivia, Interview 2, April 20, 2017)

However, the truth is that not all student participants ended up completing their GED and graduating from BAS. As I will show in this section, the ways in which students in Oregon can complete their high school education are limited, do not take into account the life circumstances of the young people looking to graduate, and can reproduce the educational traumas that students tried to escape at their previous schools. Hence, I am recommending policy shifts that fund the creation of more expansive and inclusive pathways to graduation and living wage careers.

The limited options for completing high school in Oregon do not match the needs or life circumstances of the young people looking to graduate. Between 42,506 and 56,458 of the 18-24 year-olds living in Oregon have not earned a high school diploma or GED (Hansell, 2016). And yet, Oregon is one of only two states with the lowest age limit for tuition-free schooling. In other words, after the age of 19, there are incredibly limited options for young people to complete high school for free (Lloyd, 2013). In fact, BAS is one of the only alternative schools that offers GED preparation and limited credit-

completion at no cost for youth over the age of 19. Hence, while there exists a large population of students in Oregon that have not earned a high school diploma, the majority of those students will have to pay to earn high school completion. Additionally, the data shows that those youth who are looking to graduate are more likely to be low-income or living in poverty. During the 2014-2015 school year, over half of the young people who “dropped out” of high school were economically disadvantaged, according to the Oregon Department of Education (Hansell, 2016). It may not be possible for them to afford even a small tuition to complete high school, especially since it may also mean that they cannot work as many hours while they go to school. Finally, many of the young people looking to graduate have very few high school credits and cannot afford to spend multiple years earning credits for their diploma (Hansell, 2016). If earning a high school diploma is not an option because of the cost or time demand, then the only other option for youth in Oregon is to earn their GED.

Unfortunately, earning a GED is not always a viable option for young people. In 2014, the GED changed its format and increased its difficulty to a tenth grade level (Strauss, 2015). The four subject-area tests (language arts, social studies, science, and math) are difficult and can take many months if not years of studying to pass. In fact, compared to the previous year, the GED passing rate decreased by 90 percent in 2014 after the test changed, in part because fewer people were taking it (Strauss, 2015). One of the factors preventing student success on the GED test is that it is a standardized test. Standardized tests have a well-documented history of being race, class, and gender biased and reproducing discrimination (Au, 2013). For Xavier, one of the non-White student

participants, the only available pathway to graduation was the GED. Unfortunately, he became discouraged by his lack of progress on the GED test and when a need arose to support his family, he left BAS before completing his GED. Pursuing the GED at BAS was actually reproducing the same educational traumas he experienced with standardized testing at his previous schools. Despite strong academic abilities, students of color will struggle more to pass the GED tests compared to their White peers. Consequently, the GED test can contribute to the continued internalization of feelings of self-blame and of being flawed for students of color, such as Xavier (Tuck & Gorlewski, 2016). They will believe that they are not passing through a fault of their own; instead of believing that the GED is a flawed test and an incomplete measure of what students know. And yet, in Oregon students of color are disproportionately more likely to leave school and seek out alternative options, such as GED programs (Hansell, 2016). Therefore, the pathways to graduation are not expansive or inclusive enough to meet the needs of all students seeking high school completion, in particular young people of color who are living in poverty.

In Chapter 1, I discussed the recommendations of the Oregon Secretary of State's Audits Division (2017) for stronger accountability and support of alternative education to improve outcomes for young people. These recommendations were influenced by a national graduation report by DePaoli, Balfanz, and Bridgeland (2016), which asserted that it is "critical that states take a much closer look" at alternative programs to ensure that they "truly offer students a valuable pathway towards graduation" (p. 46). Overall, attention and support of alternative education is positive because it shows a shift in

Oregon's education policy toward better serving youth from marginalized communities. However, the ability of alternative education settings to offer a valuable pathway to graduation is dependent on the flexibility and variety of meaningful, valuable ways in which a young person can graduate.

Consequently, the emphasis on scrutinizing alternative programs to hold them accountable to stronger outcomes may be misplaced; instead, what should be interrogated are the limited pathways to graduation for Oregon youth. More accountability measures for alternative schools may further restrict them and create more work for them in justifying their practices. A more efficient solution, though perhaps more expensive, is for the Oregon Department of Education (ODE) to examine and expand how they define high school graduation and create new pathways to graduate. While alternative schools and programs, such as BAS, can certainly improve, young people in this study had largely positive things to say about BAS, even though a couple of those same students did not end up graduating. Hence, it may be the limited ways in which a student can graduate that is discouraging them and causing them to leave these alternative schools, and not necessarily the practices and policies of the alternative schools themselves. This speaks strongly to the need for alternative schools to be able offer other options beyond credit completion for a diploma or GED completion given all of the factors affecting students described previously. There is a need for pathways to graduation that reflect the life circumstances of these young people: they are older, they tend to have few credits toward a diploma, they need to work, they have a short-time frame, their academic abilities are not accurately measured by standardized tests due to the cultural bias of these tests, and

they are more likely to be affected by sudden changes in personal, financial, and housing stability. Next, I offer one possible new pathway to graduation in Oregon.

In order to make Oregon's "multiple" pathways to education truly expansive and inclusive, I recommend that the ODE support alternative education by investing in the development of a portfolio option for earning high school completion. The portfolio option for high school completion would be available for young people for whom neither the GED nor high school diploma are viable options. From an equity lens, this option, in particular, is inclusive of the needs of young people of color who have aged out of the tuition-free options for completing high school and are living in poverty. Within a year or less time, a student would demonstrate competency on learning targets across the same four subject areas of the GED test. This way, GED programs could also support students doing the portfolio option. There would be multiple ways for students to demonstrate competency on the learning targets in each of the areas, including project-based, hands-on activities and not traditional paper and pencil assessments. Ideally, teachers at the GED programs would be allowed some autonomy to design these activities to demonstrate competency in order to be responsive to the needs and strengths of the individual students at their schools. In other words, the portfolio would not be completely standardized. To graduate, the student would collect the work showing their mastery and present it to staff and students at their school, emphasizing what they learned and their goals for the future. One of the advantages of the portfolio option is that it would show multiple strengths of individual students, not just their ability to memorize content for a standardized test.

Finally, I want to recognize that there are young people without high school completion for whom quitting work or cutting back on hours to go to school is not an option. Yet, these young people may be stuck in minimum wage jobs without the option to pursue living wage work. Therefore, I also recommend that the Oregon Youth Development Council fund grants for programs that support young people to pursue post-secondary education and training options through jobs where they can continue to get paid (Bell & Bueker, 2016). Similar to a construction apprenticeship program, young people in these programs could earn a wage to sustain themselves, while gaining the education and training to eventually step into work that would earn them a living-wage.

YPAR as School Practice

As described in the significance section of this chapter, YPAR became an important vehicle for young people to reclaim their voices in the education system in this study. In addition, through the use of YPAR, this study pushed on traditional conceptions of who does research and what research is for. I recommend that YPAR become a part of school practices, so that youth voice is consistently heard and that youth impact on the policies and practices at schools is normalized. While the way that YPAR is implemented at each school should be dependent on the specific context, Emdin (2016) outlined one way in which classroom teachers can co-create a space with students to collect feedback and implement changes in the classroom. Emdin (2016) created what he called “cogens,” a group of four students who he invited to voluntarily meet with him to give feedback and discuss what they saw could be different about the policies and practices in the classroom. Emdin (2016) would take this feedback and make changes, at times with the

students' help, but always so that it was obvious to the students in the cogen that he was responding to their requests for change. Every third meeting, one student rotated out and invited a new student in the class to join the cogen. And thus, the process continued with all students in the classroom being able to participate in voicing their ideas for change and seeing Emdin (2016) implement these changes. I share this example to show how teachers can incorporate YPAR methods and honor student voice into their classrooms without needing school-wide support for a larger YPAR project. In fact, beginning with smaller scale classroom YPAR projects may help convince the administration to support larger, school-wide YPAR projects.

Finally, I am interested in the ways in which I can continue to do YPAR at BAS and what the YCRs and I can continue to do to further this research study. Manny, one of the student participants, made a suggestion for a future YPAR study where the YCRs would interview teachers from mainstream schools about their experiences as teachers. It would be interesting to see how the teachers' stories compared to student participants' counternarratives and whether the YCRs would have greater empathy for teachers after hearing their stories. I would also be curious to see what actions and recommendations for changing the education would come out of that YPAR study because building a collective voice between teachers and students could have a very powerful impact. Having recently stepped into the role of Education Manager at BAS, I am eager to work with the academic teachers to implement a process for engaging student feedback on classroom practices similar to Emdin's (2016) cogens. Finally, I do not believe that my work is done in taking action and advocating for change in solidarity with the youth

voices in this research study. I plan to try to continue to meet with and reach out to the YCRs. My goal is to co-write an article together, so that our findings reach a wider audience and so that the YCRs can be published to honor the incredible work they have all done as researchers and changemakers.

Conclusion: Sankofa—Looking Back to Look Forward

Before summer break in June 2017, the YCRs and I used sankofa—looking back to look forward—as a way to reflect on who we were, who we are now, how this research process has changed us, and who we want to be in the future. When I began this doctoral program, I did not plan to research the educational experiences of youth at alternative schools alongside youth at the school where I worked. However, in proudly describing my work as a teacher at an alternative school, I found that I did not always get a positive reaction. Several times people responded with sympathy, assuming that my work must be terribly difficult and depressing. I realized the power of the dominant dropout narrative to create an image of who a “high school dropout” is and what they are capable of, as well as, to perpetuate negative assumptions about the programs serving these young people. My experience of the young people at BAS was completely different—they were highly capable, talented, hard-working, creative, intelligent young people with incredibly important perspectives to offer. It was the school system that had failed them, and yet it largely escaped blame and remained unchanged despite pushing out and dismissing amazing young people. Worse still, I saw how the young people at BAS internalized the dominant dropout narrative and often struggled to name their strengths when they first enrolled at BAS. It became clear to me that the silencing of the voices of youth who have

been pushed out was allowing the education system to continue to do harm to students. I wanted to do research that co-created space for youth at BAS to tell their stories in their own voices and from their perspectives. I also wanted my research to take action in solidarity with the young people involved in the study to advocate for changes to the education system. When I learned about YPAR, I remember feeling so clear about what I wanted to do, as if I had found my research calling.

Returning to the metaphor of dance from the introduction of Chapter 2, our research solo and group dance, like any dance, is about communication through action. Ultimately, our dance became an expression of our fluid identities, our own experiences in education, and what we learned from ourselves and the student participants during the study. So, why do this research dance? Central to this research study was youth voice—youth who have been pushed out of school dancing their stories with their own movements and with their own bodies. Too often researchers have danced the stories of youth *for* them by interpreting the youth's movements and educational experiences with their bodies, which have not experienced the same things. These researchers have decided what is significant and what to communicate in their own research dance. Our research dance was different. I danced alongside the youth co-researchers who helped determine how to collect and express their educational experiences and those of the student participants. Who best to interpret the movements and words of the youth participants than the YCRs who have also been pushed out of school and have returned to education? The YCRs are dancing their own stories and the stories of their peers with bodies that have experienced these educational injustices and with movements authentic to them.

Consequently, our research dance voiced what has too often been silenced or disregarded in educational research: the educational experiences, perceptions, and recommendations/demands for changing the education system of youth of color and youth from working class communities who have been pushed out of school in their own words, movements, rhythms, steps and missteps.

This study would not be possible without the courage, dedication, and commitment of the YCRs and the student participants to share their stories, reclaim their voices, and advocate for changes to the education system. As such, it is most appropriate to end with the voice of one of the YCRs, Sk8 Nash, who wrote this poem to represent and synthesize the findings and themes of our YPAR study. It is titled, “Speak Up,” which is Sk8’s advice to young people. I hope that young people continue to reclaim spaces for their voices, speaking up and speaking out against the cruelty of the education system.

Speak Up

Sk8 Nash

We can’t learn and be comfortable because the schools are like prisons, we have no freedom in school.

We can't succeed because we're set up to fail. We can't feel safe because there's racism ‘n white supremacy.

Our attitudes be a rage because we keep things bottled in.

We don't trust telling our personal problems or whatever to white people.

We don't want to be controlled so stop trying to control the youth.

Schools seem to be built with bricks of lies, walls of unfairness, classes of internalized racism, white doors with negative assumptions about youth, hallways that lack of change, stereotypical lockers full of books of deception.

We have problems at home that we can't leave at home because problems follow us everywhere they just bigger when other problems interfere.

If teachers really want us to pass and see our careers then why do we as students always receive an unnecessary punishment, why is it so easy to take a student out of school but not a teacher?

Why is there always that "my way or the highway" saying from the teachers? I'd rather take the highways, says the students. Why? Because on the highway we don't have to hear "I'm right you're wrong," or be in overcrowded classrooms.

We as students know what passive aggressive is and it's easy to spot that teachers be making inappropriate comments.

Also we as students notice that teachers treat students like they're stupid.

If you want respect you have to give it, but teachers want the respect that they won't give, they judge students but don't even get to know the students.

SPEAK UP!!

It's about time someone did.

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Appendix A: Research Timeline

Timing	Activity	Data Collection Instruments and Measures
September 2016 – March 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dissertation proposal in November 2016 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Date: Tuesday, November 22, 2016 ○ Turned proposal into committee on Tuesday, November 8th • IRB turned in December 2016 • IRB approval on March 7, 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ 1st Revision/clarification request on January 31st, 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Responded on Monday, February 20th ○ 2nd Revision/clarification request on March 2, 2017 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Responded on Monday, March 6th • Once dissertation proposal and IRB were approved, I invited students to join me as co-researchers using consent form (includes an option for them to be named in the research) <p>Began work with seven co-researchers on Thursday, March 9th</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Meeting on Mondays for one hour during school • Two days a week after school for one and a half hours (Mondays and Thursdays) • One time per month for four hours at Bridgetown Alternative School (BAS) or other location • Total: 20 hours/month 	
March 2017	<p>Week 1 (Meeting March 9th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Personal education experience • BAS Education Manager presented consent letter for youth co-researcher participation • Community building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We read and discussed In Lak'Ech poem (agreed to read at each meeting) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Photos taken during our meetings • Youth co-researcher reflections in

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ We all created name cards, talked about our names, and created a symbol to represent where we are from/who we are ○ Youth co-researchers (YCRs) and I wrote six words about ourselves as learners • Co-created agreements about missing meetings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How to let everyone know if you miss a meeting? How many meetings can a co-researcher miss? ○ What are the consequences of missing a meeting? How can we help each other plan/hold each other accountable to be there? • Students created researcher notebooks <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Co-researchers decorated them, as they wanted, to represent themselves ○ They were a place for formal reflections/writing and informal observations about world and themselves throughout YPAR experience • Videos: Spoken word from Prince Ea “The people vs. the school system” • Reflections: YCRs wrote about their own education story, their voice in the education system, and their identities <p>Week 2 (Week of March 13th—Includes Saturday session at Montavilla Townshend’s Teahouse)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: The larger social, economic, historical, and political factors leading to pushout from school • Set democratic ground rules for participation (using In Lak’Ech as a model) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discussed: What does respect look like to each of us? What does caring look like? What supports do we each need to participate to our fullest? ○ Created agreements/ground rules/norms 	Researcher Notebooks
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Created group emails, group texts, and shared Google slides document, so we could all stay informed, built co-ownership of work • Reviewed timeline for project • Discussed interview methods and protocol: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How can we encourage other youth who have been pushed out of school to share their educational experiences and how can we share them more widely/take action? ○ How can we organize interviews to make it more comfortable for students? Group interviews? Multiple interviews? What did you learn from your interviews with community members/family? • Agreed to the following interview methods: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Maintain confidentiality ○ Offer multiple modes for interviewing (group, 1-1, small group, with and without me) ○ Get feedback from students at end of each interview ○ Review consent/confidentiality before each interview ○ Give out appreciation/thank you cards to students who participate in interviews • Community building <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ YCRs and I created a collective poster with words to represent us as learners and a symbol (if we choose) ○ In the center we thought of the words, which united us and reflected our goals for the research ○ We used these words to create our team name • Various discussions/reflections about education system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Hidden curriculum: What is something you learned in school that was not an intended part of the curriculum? 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Sankofa “Return and Get it”: When you look back on your education experience in mainstream schools from where you are now, how have your understandings about your experience changed (or not changed) given what you know now? ○ What is the difference between equity and equality? ○ We shared personal education experiences with each other, noting similarities and differences (building empathy) ○ How did we get here to this education system? Why are the inequalities known, but yet nothing seems to change? ○ Iceberg model and levels of consciousness: what are the deeper structures, systems, and mental models that keep the education system from changing and perpetuating injustices? ○ Current issues and negative staff interactions happening at BAS—how can we give staff feedback? Investigating current ways in which staff speak to students that is passive/aggressive and does not land well <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Videos: Spoken word about hidden curriculum “Changing the World, One Word At a Time”, Spoken word from Suli Breaks “I will not let an exam result decide my fate”, and Ken Robinson TED Talk “Changing Education Paradigms” • Reflections: What does justice mean to you? What is a just education?; What motivates you to be a part of this research project? What drives you/fires you up about this work?; Putting personal experience in education in larger context; how they experienced the banking model of education; What does the Toni Morrison 	
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	<p>quote, “Definitions belong to the definers, not to the defined” mean to you?</p> <p>Week 3 (Week of March 20th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Co-constructing group identity, interview as research method, finalizing research questions and research methods • YCRs and I discussed the research questions and decided not to make any modifications • Various discussions/reflections about education system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Microaggressions: Review check list of education-based microaggressions ○ Continued conversation about current issues and negative staff interactions happening at PYB—how can we give staff feedback? Investigating current ways in which staff speak to students that is passive/aggressive and does not land well ○ Investigated “Problem Tree” about NYC School System from another YPAR study: What can you relate to? What surprises you? What would you change about it based on your experience? Anything else? ○ What is education for? What defines an effective education to you? What problems do we see in the current education system? • YCRs interviewed a family or community member about educational experiences <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ YCRs brainstormed own questions ○ YCRs did interview on their own and reflected in their researcher notebooks about how the interview went, what went well, what was awkward, and what they would change, etc. ○ We discussed in meeting: What can we take away from this experience 	
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	<p>to apply to our own interviews for this research project?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • YCRs gave feedback on the interview protocol and we made changes based on feedback • Discussed introducing the study to student body at BAS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How do we introduce our research study to the rest of students at the school? How can we get them interested in participating? <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What are interviews going to look like? ▪ Emphasize confidentiality ▪ Inspire students—get them fired up about issues in education ▪ Share our team name, mission & goals ○ Created a To Do list—delegated tasks • Designed a visual representation of our group using our individual words and symbols, used this as inspiration to create: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ A group name for our research team ○ A statement about who we are and our goals as a research team • Reflections: Thinking about pressing issues in education system: What must change?; What excites me/makes me nervous about introducing this project to the rest of students?; General feedback about process. <p>Week 4 (Met Tuesday, March 28th during Spring Break at the Montavilla Townshend's Teahouse)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Introducing study to student body, deepening group identity and research goals, interview as research method • We met once for 4 hours to design and practice the presentation to introduce study to student body <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Presentation—what must we say to students about the study? ○ Leading a brief small group activity 	
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	<p>to capture students' creative re-imagining of schools—what do they envision? What must change?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Finalized group name for our research team and our statement about who we are and our goals as a research team • Began co-creating our own problem tree for the education system and a list of ways to take action (What action do we commit to taking based on our findings?) • Touched-base with students about doing another interview with a family/community members using questions from our interview protocol • Reflections: What knowledge and skills do I bring that might be different from other educational researchers? Why does my voice matter? Who do I want to be as a researcher? What action do we commit to taking based on our findings? 	
<p>April 2017</p>	<p>Week 5 (Week of April 3rd—Includes Saturday session at Zoiglhaus and BAS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Ethics, logistics of participation, including consent to participate and introducing study to student body, practicing interviewing skills and interview protocol • Introduced study to students at school's Community Meeting <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Gave overview of work YCRs have done so far ○ Introduced our mission and plan for study ○ Shared our finalized agreements for the interviews ○ Talked about confidentiality ○ Led small group discussion after watching spoken word video "Changing the World, One Word At a Time" to get students' initial thoughts and perceptions of education system <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What is school for? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Photos taken during our meetings • Youth co-researcher reflections in Researcher Notebooks • Audiotaping of group interviews student participants

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ How do you define “success”? ▪ Experiences in education ▪ Creative re-imaginings of school and school system—what would you do to change it? ○ Recruited students (18 and older) who were interested in being interviewed • Debriefed the presentation to student body • Collected feedback from interviewing family/community members: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Shared notes/take aways from interviews ○ What did they learn about content and process? ○ Gathered initial thoughts about a protocol and interview questions for facilitated conversations—groups? Individual? Both? • Discussed ethics and confidentiality in the context of our confidentiality contract, finalized interview protocol, and finalized interview process/methods <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Used our own interview experiences of each other and family/community members to finalize interview protocol ○ We also used what we heard from BAS students during the small group activity when we introduced the study to finalize the interview protocol ○ Decided on the set up of room for interviews ○ Agreed on how we would appreciate students ○ Created form to collect feedback from participants about the interviews • Discussed empathy in terms of ethics and confidentiality <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Watched video from Brené Brown 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> on sympathy vs. empathy <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How are confidentiality and empathy related? ○ How can we model empathy in the way we conduct our interviews? ○ How will we support each other/take care of ourselves as we hear stories that are difficult to share/hear? ○ How might hearing these stories affect our interactions with students outside of the interviews in our daily interactions? What role does empathy play in this? • Began recruitment and scheduling of interviews with students at school • Discussed ethnic studies <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Read parts of Sherman Alexie's "Indian Education" ○ Created an iceberg about the educational experiences that Sherman Alexie describes—moving from events → patterns/trends → underlying structures → mental models to get a deep look at what is underneath these experiences ○ Talked about examples of ethnic studies in our communities: work of student group, ALLY, part of the Asian Pacific American Network of Oregon; work of another BAS teacher with Teaching with Purpose organization in Salem; Precious Knowledge documentary • Began to create our own Problem Tree using post-it notes <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Pulled experiences, ideas, and themes from our own experiences, discussions as co-researchers so far, and from Sherman Alexie's work ○ Discussed issues of racism, sexism, and homophobia in schools, including the issue that there are very few teachers of color 	
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	<p>Week 6 (Week of April 10th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: First interviews, debriefing interview protocol • Continued to schedule and recruit students to interview • Gave out consent letters and clarified what we are asking from students who participate in the study (one of the BAS staff members did this on Monday, April 10th in the morning) • YCRs practiced group interviews with a modified interview protocol with several BAS staff members <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Focused on questions about staff's educational experiences ○ Asked for feedback from staff • Discussed and signed confidentiality contract • Held first group interview for participants in Group A²³ (Thursday, April 13th) • Discussed the interview using the following debrief questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ How are you feeling after hearing what came up in the group interview today? ○ How has this information affected you? ○ When you think about your day tomorrow and interacting with your peers, do you see it impacting your interactions? ○ How will you keep what was shared today from affecting your interactions? How will this be difficult? How will it be easy? ○ What supports do you need? How can we support each other as a research team? ○ Who will you talk to and what will you do if you need support? 	
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²³ Students at BAS where the study takes place are divided into two crews of students who rotate between being in academic classes and being on a work site. Group A and B are used to designate those two groups of students and when they will be present in academics for the group interviews.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We also discussed important points/generative themes—what came up for the YCRs as significant? • Also we gave each other feedback and read over the feedback forms from interview participants <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ What did we do well? What should we do differently? ○ How does this impact our second group interview with student participants next week? • Wrote and signed thank you cards for each of the interview participants <p>Week 7 (Week of April 17th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Continued interviews, beginning data analysis • Local university professor presented about ethics of research from decolonizing perspective <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Explored potential ethical dilemmas in our research ○ Discussed decolonizing research ○ Made changes and/or recognized limitations in our research study • Discussed ideas for what we want to do after the interviews to share our findings: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Present to future teachers at a local university ○ Present to BAS staff/community ○ Present at conferences (Northwest Teachers for Social Justice and Teaching with Purpose conferences) • Held second group interview of students at school with same group as week before, Group A (Thursday, April 20th) • Discussions and debrief: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ See debrief questions listed above in Week 6 ○ Beginning data analysis: What is coming up for you that is significant? ○ Feedback: What is going well? Are we getting the information we want? 	
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	<p>What changes do we want to make?</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Wrote and signed thank you cards for each of the interview participants • Attended Professor Jeff Duncan-Andrade's lecture through Teaching With Purpose on Thursday, April 20th • Talked about confidentiality in context of interview • Reflected on experiences as researchers and what we are learning from the student participants as it relates to our own educational experiences • Transcribed interviews <p>Week 8 (Week of April 24th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Continued interviews, beginning data analysis • Checked-in—how we were each doing outside of this project and school • Discussed the lecture with Jeff Duncan-Andrade and wrote email to him, so that we could connect and talk further <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ YCRs showed interest in reading more, getting copies of the books that Duncan-Andrade mentioned • Began NIH Web-based training in "Protecting Human Research Participants" • Held first group interview of students at school in Group B (Thursday, April 27th) • Discussions and debrief: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ See debrief questions listed above in Week 6 ○ Beginning data analysis: What is coming up for you that is significant? ○ Feedback: What is going well? Are we getting the information we want? What changes do we want to make? • Wrote and signed thank you cards for each of the interview participants • Reflected on experiences as researchers and what we are learning from the student participants as it relates to our own educational experiences 	
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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews 	
May 2017	<p>Week 9 (Week of May 1st)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Continued interviews, beginning data analysis • Reflected on the research project: Is it what you expected? Were there surprises? How do you feel the same or different from when you started? • Collected feedback on the process: What has been the most useful part of this process so far? What do you want more of? Less of? • All YCRs involved in the interviews completed the NIH Web-based training and are certified in “Protecting Human Research Participants” • Discussed what is/is not working at PYB: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Rethinking boundaries policy ○ Creating advocacy groups ○ Confusion around attendance policy ○ Equity—asking for you what need, but not getting it ○ Trust between students and staff, staff trust of students • Held second group interview of students at school with same group as week before, Group B (one student requested an individual interview, others interviewed in the group—both happened Thursday, May 4th) • Discussions and debrief: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ See debrief questions listed above in Week 6 ○ Beginning data analysis: What is coming up for you that is significant? ○ Feedback: What is going well? Are we getting the information we want? What changes do we want to make? • Wrote and signed thank you cards for each of the interview participants • Reflected on experiences as researchers and what we are learning from the student participants as it relates to our own 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Photos taken during our meetings • Youth co-researcher reflections in Researcher Notebooks • Audiotaping of group interviews student participants • Member checking of student participants

	<p>educational experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews <p>Week 10 (Week of May 8th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Beginning data analysis, self-care • Start of new phase (quarter) at school <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discussed whether we should interview some of the new students who had recently enrolled at BAS ○ Figured out solutions for the logistical challenges around interviewing participants given the changes to students' schedules and groupings at the start of the new phase ○ Revised schedule for third group interview for both Group A and Group B • Reflected on experiences as co-researchers in general • Book exploration—took time to read and discuss some of the books I used to write dissertation proposal and books recommended by local university professor and Professor Jeff Duncan-Andrade • Worked on our team symbol • Began initial data analysis: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Read the transcripts and/or listened to interviews so far—made a list of what points we wanted to ask more about, important points we wanted to return to, and what we wanted to clarify with student participants • Reviewed protocol for third group interview—to clarify key points brought up in previous interviews, ask what demands student participants would make of the education system, and to find out what the participants think has been significant about what was said in the interviews • Reflected on experiences as researchers and what we are learning from the student participants as it relates to our own 	
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	<p>educational experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews <p>Week 11 (Week of May 15th—Includes Saturday session at BAS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Preparing for final interviews, demands of education system • Reflected on experiences as co-researchers: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Given the Institutional Review Board's concerns that you (as co-researchers) may treat your peers differently, how do you respond? ○ If the IRB members were here, what would you tell them/advise them for future research projects with YCRs? • Reflection: Instead of calling yourself a dropout, how would you describe yourself in six words? • Continued initial data analysis: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Read the transcripts and/or listened to interviews so far—made a list of what points we wanted to ask more about, important points we wanted to return to, and what we wanted to clarify with student participants ○ Modified third group interview protocol and questions based on this initial data analysis • Attended Professor Gloria-Ladson Billings lecture through Teaching With Purpose on Thursday, May 18th • Watched the Precious Knowledge documentary together and discussed it <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Brought up a lot of emotions—anger and sadness ○ Talked about how our ideas for changing the education system and practice/policies at BAS <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Trusting students, letting go of so much control of students bodies ▪ Asking students “What do you want to learn today?” • Reflected on experiences as researchers and 	
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	<p>what we are learning from the student participants as it relates to our own educational experiences</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews <p>Week 12 (Week of May 22nd)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Final interviews, demands of education system • Dissertation chair attended our meeting on Monday, May 22nd • Finalized idea for butcher paper to capture how students describe themselves as learners at BAS in the final interviews • Finalized important dates for taking action: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Speaking to Professor Jeff Duncan-Andrade by Skype on June 19th ○ Presenting at a local university to future teachers on June 15th ○ Presenting to the BAS community on June 21st • Continued with interviews and initial data analysis • Third and final group interviews of Group A (in two interviews on Monday, May 22nd and Friday, May 26th) • Discussions and debrief of third and final group interviews: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ See debrief questions above from Week 6 ○ What came up for you that is significant? What themes do we see in the demands participants are making of the education system? ○ Feedback: What is going well? Are we getting the information we want? What changes do we want to make for next group interview? • Wrote and signed thank you cards for each of the interview participants • Reflected on experiences as researchers and what we are learning from the student participants as it relates to our own educational experiences • Transcribed interviews 	
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	<p>Week 13 (Week of May 29th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Demands of education system, member checking, planning for presentation • Reflection: What significant ideas are coming up for you in the interviews and in your own stories? What emotions is this research work bringing up for you? • Third and final group interview of students from Group B (Thursday, June 1st) • Discussions and debrief of interview: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ See debrief questions above from Week 6 ○ What came up for you that is significant? What themes do we see in the demands participants are making of the education system? • Wrote and signed thank you cards for each of the interview participants • Began creating our list of initial demands of education system • Brainstormed ideas for how/what to present based on our initial data analysis and interview debriefs 	
June 2017	<p>Week 14 (Week of June 5th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Demands of education system • Continued with data analysis • Third and final group interview of remainder of students from Group B • Interviewed some of student participants about their experiences being interviewed • Worked on presentation • Listened to interviews for key quotes to support our themes • Returned to youth participants for member checking • Created demands of education system <p>Week 15 (Week of June 12th— Includes Saturday session at BAS)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Voicing our demands • Prepared for upcoming presentation 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Field notes • Photos taken during our meetings • Youth co-researcher reflections in Researcher Notebooks • Member checking of student participants • Videotaping youth co-researchers and my own reflections

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Presented to cohort of future teachers at a local university (Thursday, June 15th at 4:30 PM) • Created a visual representation of our YPAR project • Documented our YPAR experience (I interviewed YCRs on June 13th) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interviewed YCRs about how they describe what they did in the study ○ Interviewed YCRs about their experiences and how the YPAR experience changed them <p>Week 16 (Week of June 19th)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Goal/Theme: Voicing our demands • Prepared for talking with Jeff Duncan-Andrade (ended up being canceled) • Completed final preparations for our presentation to BAS staff and students • Delivered presentation to BAS community (staff and students) on Wednesday June 21st at 2:45 PM, which including our recommendation for better support for young women in the program • I honored all the YCRs at the BAS graduation ceremony by presenting each of them with a different book we used during our research study • YCRs and I wrote and reflected about our experience doing this research and debriefed the presentations • Celebrated our work over the last few months and shared gratitude and appreciation for each other—YCRs gathered together on Saturday, June 24th to cook, eat, play games, and hang out • Discussed ideas for what's next after summer break and our plans to present at conferences and continue with data analysis • Applied to present at the Northwest Teachers for Social Justice conference 	about the YPAR process
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July 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • BAS on summer break—YCRs and I took a break from research as well 	
August 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews • Met with YCRs to continue data analysis and prepare for upcoming presentations (about 16 total hours): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Analyzed and discussed significant themes in finalized interview transcripts that we read over together ○ Discussed YPAR process and experiences ○ Began co-constructing counternarratives and refining our co-constructed themes ○ Created posters to represent the humanizing research practices in our research for our presentation at a local university. Focused on how we: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Created spaces for empathy in our research ▪ Co-created a community of practice as co-researchers ▪ Designed our interview protocol • Presented with three of the YCRs to future teachers about our YPAR methods at local university on August 28th at 4:30 PM • Applied to present at the Teaching with Purpose conference 	
September 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews, including writing notes about the context of each interview • Met with YCRs to continue data analysis and prepare for upcoming presentations (about 16 total hours): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ On-going data analysis and discussion of significant themes from finalized interview transcripts 	

	<p>and our researcher notebooks</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Continued co-constructing counternarratives ○ Continued refining our co-constructed themes based on feedback from previous presentations and further data analysis of transcripts ○ Prepared for October conference presentations <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Created binders with artifacts (pictures, copies of interview protocol, examples of reflections from researcher notebooks, etc.) to represent our YPAR process to share at the presentations ▪ Began to synthesize our findings by returning to the Problem Tree we started in weeks 4 and 5 to create a visual representation of the issues in the education system as shown in our research <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Spoke with Jeff Duncan-Andrade on September 27th via Skype 	
October 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Transcribed interviews, creating summaries of the context and key ideas in each interview • Met with YCRs to continue data analysis and prepare for upcoming presentations (about 16 total hours): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Synthesized the findings and co-constructed themes by finalizing our Problem Tree (co-creating a visual representation of the problems in the education system based on our findings) ○ Continued co-constructing counternarratives and finalized co-constructed themes 	

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Co-designed a “business” card to share our contact information ○ Finalized our conference presentations • Attended and presented at the Teaching with Purpose Conference in Portland on October 13th and 14th • Attended and presented at the Northwest Teachers for Social Justice Conference in Seattle on October 21st 	
November 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No meetings with YCRs while I began compiling the counternarratives • Completed all transcriptions, including the summaries of the context and key ideas in each interview • Analyzed YCR reflections in the researcher notebooks • Began writing draft of Chapter 4 	
December 2017	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Met with YCRs to continue data analysis and engage in member checking (3.5 total hours): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Created brief descriptions/biographies of student participants and YCRs ○ Collected their input/feedback on how I was compiling the counternarratives ○ Discussed their experience doing YPAR • Continued compiling counternarratives • Dissertation writing (Chapter 4 and 5) 	
January 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Several student participants engaged in member checking their counternarratives • Met with YCRs (3.5 hours): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Read the counternarratives and sections of the dissertation together for member checking ○ Discussed their experiences 	

	<p>presenting at conferences with YCRs</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dissertation writing (Chapter 4 and 5)	
February 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Met with YCRs (3.5 hours):<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Read the counternarratives and sections of the dissertation together for member checking○ Finalized descriptions/biographies of YCRs and student participants• Dissertation writing	
March 2018	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Dissertation defense on March 16, 2018:<ul style="list-style-type: none">○ Turned proposal into committee on Friday, March 2nd	

Appendix B: Informed Consent Letter for Youth Co-Researchers

Study title: Pushing Back on School Pushout: Youth at an Alternative School Advocate for Educational Change Through Youth Participatory Action Research

Principle investigator:

Swapna Mukhopadhyay
Graduate School of Education
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503-222-3095
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jessica.burbach@pybpdx.org

Co-Investigator:

Jessica H. Burbach
Graduate School of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
(503) 522-0066
Email address:

Introduction to the study:

You are being asked to participate in a research study as a co-researcher with Jessica Burbach from the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Graduate School of Education, at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon. This study seeks to explore the educational experiences of youth (ages 18-25) who have left mainstream schools and now attend an alternative school from their own perspectives and in their own voices. Your voice matters in changing the education system and your input is valued to advance the knowledge and understanding of making school a safe and just place for meaningful learning.

What will happen during the study?

As a youth co-researcher you will learn to research and in the process gain a deeper understanding of how to make the schools better for youth like you who attend an alternative school. You will become one of the researchers. You will participate in data collecting and analysis with me.

Over the course of four and a half months, we will meet for: (1) one hour a week within the school day; (2) one and a half hours twice a week; and (3) one four-hour long meeting per month at Portland State University (PSU) or another offsite location. The total time commitment is about 20 hours per month from mid-February 2017 to June 2017. Altogether, this is about 90 hours of work.

Data will be gathered throughout the study. The data collected include: audio and video recordings of our conversations and the group interviews, photos of our meetings, and your research notes and reflections. Together we will do these things:

- Present our findings to key leaders in education
- Interview your peers about their educational experiences
- Reflect and write about the research process
- Create recommendations for improving the educational system

- Co-present at educational conferences, for example, the Northwest Teachers for Social Justice Conference in Portland and Seattle

Benefits:

You will become part of a community and research team. This study will recognize and validate your voice and voices of others in sharing your educational experiences. When we write together your words, writing, and voice will be part of what we create together, our co-constructed findings, and our recommendations for educational change.

Risks:

There are no known risks in this study, but some individuals may experience discomfort when answering questions. Speaking about past experiences can bring up and uncover emotions. Revisiting the past is not always comfortable. Jessica Burbach will be careful to support your emotional needs and if at all necessary you can meet with your advocate (school counselor) to get further support.

How is the participant's (your) privacy protected?

We are working as a team, so we need to support each other by maintaining trust and confidentiality. As a teacher at your school and as the investigator, it is my legal obligation to report child abuse, child neglect, harm to self or others or any life-threatening situation to the appropriate authorities, and; therefore your confidentiality will not be maintained. All data/material will be kept for 7 years in a locked file or electronically password protected in Jessica Burbach's home office and then destroyed.

Contact:

If you have questions regarding this study, you may come and talk to me at any time, before, during, or after school, or at my home phone (503) 522-0066, or by email jessica.burbach@pybpdx.org.

Institutional Review Board:

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may call the PSU Office for Research Integrity at (503) 725-2227 or 1(877) 480-4400. The ORI is the office that supports the PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from PSU and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving human participants. For more information, you may also access the IRB website at <https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity>.

Voluntary Participation as a Co-Researcher:

You are a participant in the study as a co-researcher and this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your academic standing. If you desire to withdraw, please let me know in writing.

Unforeseen risk:

There may be risks that are not anticipated. However, every effort will be made to minimize any risks.

Cost to participate:

There is no cost for your participation in this study.

Compensation:

Each youth co-researcher will be given a small stipend of \$800 to honor your participation and hard work in the study. Refreshments will also be provided during after school meetings.

Please Read, The Following Statement And Sign Below If You Agree.

I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study and my questions have been answered. I have read the information in this consent form and I agree to participate as a youth co-researcher.

You will get a copy of this form to keep for yourself.

Select One:

- ☐ I give permission for my real identity to be used in the research _____ (please initial)
- ☐ I wish my identity to remain confidential _____ (please initial)

Signature of the youth co-researcher

Date

Printed name of the youth co-researcher

Appendix C: Informed Consent Letter for Student Participants

Study title: Pushing Back on School Pushout: Youth at an Alternative School Advocate for Educational Change Through Youth Participatory Action Research

Principle investigator:

Swapna Mukhopadhyay
Graduate School of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
503-222-3095
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Co-Investigator:

Jessica H. Burbach
Graduate School of Education
Curriculum and Instruction
PO Box 751
Portland, OR 97207-0751
(503) 522-0066
Email address:

Introduction to the study:

You are being asked to participate in a research study with Jessica Burbach from the Department of Curriculum & Instruction, Graduate School of Education, at Portland State University in Portland, Oregon, USA. This study seeks to explore the educational experiences of youth (ages 18-25) who have left mainstream schools and now attend an alternative school from their own perspectives and in their own voices. You will get a chance to talk with your peers about your educational experiences. Your voice matters in changing the education system and your input is valued to advance the knowledge and understanding of making school a safe and just place for meaningful learning.

What will happen during the study?

You will take part in three group interviews over the course of seven weeks. Your peers and Jessica Burbach will interview you along with other fellow peers. Each interview will last about an hour. The interview will ask about your experiences at this alternative school, your previous experiences in mainstream education, and your recommendations for changing the education system. After the interviews, you may be asked to review what you have said with one of the researchers to clarify and validate the findings.

Your conversation with your peers in these group interviews will serve as a source of information. These group interviews will be videotaped and audio recorded. The audio will be used to transcribe the conversation to find themes from the interviews and create recommendations for changing the education system.

Benefits:

There will be no direct benefit to you from this study beyond the pleasure of sharing your experiences and helping influence the recommendations for changing the education system.

Risks:

There are no known risks in this study, but speaking about past experiences can bring up and uncover emotions. Revisiting the past is not always comfortable. If at all necessary you can meet with your advocate (school counselor) to get further support. All data/material will be kept for 7 years in a locked file or electronically password protected in Jessica Burbach's home office and then destroyed.

How is the participant's (your) privacy protected?

All data obtained from participants will be kept confidential. This means that your name and what you tell us will be kept confidential. The names of people who take part in the study will not be given to anyone else. And we will only reveal what you say in a way that no one could ever guess or know it was you who said it. As a teacher at your school and as the investigator, it is my legal obligation to report child abuse, child neglect, harm to self or others or any life-threatening situation to the appropriate authorities, and therefore, your confidentiality will not be maintained. All data collected will be kept in a locked file cabinet or restricted and password locked computer. All research material will be stored for 7 years and then destroyed.

Contact:

If you have questions regarding this study, you may come and talk to me at any time, before, during, or after school, or at my home phone (503) 522-0066, or by email jessica.burbach@pybpdx.org.

Institutional Review Board:

If you have questions regarding your rights as a research participant, you may call the PSU Office for Research Integrity at (503) 725-2227 or 1(877) 480-4400. The ORI is the office that supports the PSU Institutional Review Board (IRB). The IRB is a group of people from PSU and the community who provide independent oversight of safety and ethical issues related to research involving human participants. For more information, you may also access the IRB website at <https://sites.google.com/a/pdx.edu/research/integrity>.

Voluntary Participation:

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You have the right to withdraw at anytime or refuse to participate entirely without jeopardy to your academic standing. If you desire to withdraw, please let me know in writing.

Unforeseen risk:

There may be unanticipated risks. However, every effort will be made to minimize any risks.

Cost to participate:

There is no cost for your participation in this study.

Compensation:

Refreshments will be provided at the interviews. There is no other compensation for this study.

Please Read, The Following Statement And Sign Below If You Agree.

I have had the chance to ask any questions I have about this study and my questions have been answered. I have read the information in this consent form and I agree to participate.

You will get a copy of this form to keep for yourself.

Select One:

☐ I give permission for my real identity to be used in the research _____ (please initial)

☐ I wish my identity to remain confidential _____ (please initial)

Signature of the participant

Date

Printed name of the participant

Appendix D: Readings and Videos for Discussion on Educational Injustice

Readings/Videos	Rationale for Use
Alexie, S. (1994). <i>The Lone Ranger and Tonto fistfight in heaven</i> . New York, NY: Harper Perennial.	Excerpt, “Indian Education” for discussion on schools as places of assimilation.
Breaks, Suli. (2013, April 14). I will not let an exam result decide my fate [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D-eVF_G_p-Y	Spoken word video to inspire a conversation in which we question: what is school is for?
Brown, B. (2013). Brené Brown on empathy [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=1Evwgu369Jw	Animated video about the difference between sympathy and empathy for our discussion about creating empathy in the interviews.
Ea, Prince. (2016, September 26). The people vs. the school system [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzhXScBlT_Q	Spoken word video to start our discussion critiquing the school system and reimagining what it could be.
Escobedo, B., McGavin, R., & Allen, Z. (2014). Somewhere in America [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YshUDa10JYY	Spoken word video from three young women to initiate a conversation about hidden curriculum and what schools teach us through silence.
McGinnis, E. I. (Producer), & Palos, A. L. (Director). (2011). <i>Precious knowledge</i> [Motion picture]. United States: Dos Vatos Productions.	Documentary to engage us in a conversation about youth activism and to show us examples of how school could be different (culturally sustaining, student-centered, etc.).
Robinson, K. (2010). Changing education paradigms [Video file]. Retrieved from https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zDZFcdGpL4U	Animated video to begin a conversation around how the school system is set up to control and fail young people.

Tuck, E. (2012). <i>Urban youth and school pushout: Gateways, get-aways, and the GED</i> . New York, NY: Routledge.	Excerpts to represent the larger historical, social, economic, and political context of school pushout.
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Appendix E: Interview Protocol

This interview protocol will be followed closely, but it is not a word for word script. Youth co-researchers and myself conducted interviews with a group of student participants. Each group interview took place on a different day and lasted no more than one hour.

Group Interview 1

- Review the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews. Participants given the opportunity to ask questions.
- Experiences at an alternative high school
 - What do you like about this school? What works for you here?
 - What does not work for you here? What do you wish was different here?
 - What is success for you? Has the meaning of success changed at this alternative school? Tell me more.
 - What is different about this school and the high school(s) you attended that is most important to you?
 - What (or who) motivates you in school?
 - How did you find out about this alternative school?
 - Anything else about this school?
- What about your parents'/caregivers' experiences in school? How did you learn about it? Has it impacted your experience? Tell me more.

Group Interview 2

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Experiences in mainstream high school
 - What brought you here to this alternative school? Have you tried other alternative schools?
 - What led you to leave your mainstream school? Be specific.
 - Tell us about your high school. What did you like about your previous (mainstream) high school? What worked well for you there?
 - What did not work for you at your previous (mainstream) high school? What prevented your success there? Tell us about an event.
 - Anything else about your mainstream high school experience that you will always remember (positive or negative)? Friends? Teachers?
- How do teachers affect the way students act and vice versa?
- What are your thoughts on the term drop out? Does it define you/your experience? Have you heard of the term pushout? How would you define/describe your experience of leaving school?

Group Interview 3

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Tell me more about what you meant when you said _____ (excerpt from the previous two interviews).
- What was most significant about what you heard from the group in the last two interviews about their experience in school? What stands out to you?
- In your own words, how would you define the purpose of school? (i.e. What is education for?)
- Do you think that the education system needs to change? Why or why not? What must change in the education system? Is it possible for the change to happen?
- If the entire education system were redesigned, how would you rebuild it if you were in charge?
- What do you hope for your children's or future children's education?
- If someone from the Oregon Department of Education (ODE), or the principal at your previous school, or the U.S. president was here, what would you offer as insight into the changes that need to be made about to the education system, in general or particular to Portland?

Appendix F: Updated Interview Protocol

Below is a summary of the questions that we actually asked at each of the group interviews. Changes were made to the original interview protocol because of timing and because we were responsive to what came up in each interview and in the previous interviews.

Group Interview 1

- Review the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews. Participants given the opportunity to ask questions.
- Experiences at an alternative high school
 - What do you like about this school? What works for you here?
 - What does not work for you here? What do you wish was different here?
 - What is success for you? Has the meaning of success changed at this alternative school? Tell me more.

Group Interview 2

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Experiences in mainstream high school
 - What brought you here to this alternative school? Have you tried other alternative schools?
 - What led you to leave your mainstream school? Be specific.
 - Tell us about your high school. What did you like about your previous (mainstream) high school? What worked well for you there?

Group Interview 3

- Brief review of the scope and mission of the study and parameters of participation in the interviews.
- Tell me more about what you meant when you said _____ (excerpt from the previous two interviews).
- Instead of calling yourself a dropout, how would you describe yourself as a learner in six words?
- What do you think about the idea of dropping out being a success?
- If you could change one thing about your high school experiences, what would it be?
- How did you know that your teachers didn't care? What did that look like?
- Describe a time when you experienced racism, sexism or homophobia at school.
- Favorite teacher. Why? Least favorite teacher Why?
- How often did you see yourself—people of your racial and cultural background in the school/curriculum?
- Appreciations—gratitude circle

Appendix G: Example of Thank You Cards to Student Participants

Appendix H: Confidentiality Contract

I understand that maintaining confidentiality is a sacred oath. As co-researchers we have agreed that if we do harm to each other, we do harm to ourselves; and, if we respect each other, then we respect ourselves. Maintaining confidentiality of the interview participants and the sensitive information they may share is extremely important because it protects and respects the community. Ultimately, to maintain my integrity as a co-researcher it is my responsibility to comply with the following statements:

1. With respect to the group interviews, what I hear, discuss, and reflect on will only be shared with Jessica Burbach and other youth co-researchers and only during our meetings for this research project.
2. I will only discuss and reflect on what I have heard in the group interviews when we are meeting together as a research team.
3. However tempting it may be, I will not share what I hear in the interviews with friends, family, or other members of my community (neighbors, religious group members, etc.).
4. If I do feel the urge to talk about what I hear, I will immediately text, call, or contact Jessica Burbach.
5. If I feel upset, sad, or angry about what I hear in these interviews, I will immediately contact Jessica Burbach and speak with my school advocate (one of the licensed clinical social workers on staff) for further support.
6. As we have discussed, maintaining my integrity as a researcher means that I will continue to show the same respect and care for my peers after the interviews regardless of what sensitive information they may share. If I have any indication that this might be difficult for me, I will immediately contact Jessica Burbach.
7. I understand that my participation as a youth co-researcher is dependent on maintaining confidentiality as well as my integrity as a co-researcher.
8. If a breach of confidentiality or integrity does occur, I will let Jessica Burbach know and I will withdraw myself from this study.

Signature of Youth Co-Researcher

Date